



Gertrude

Orlan Orphans, Book 9

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KIRSTEN
OSBOURNE

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Gertrude

Orlan Orphans Book 9

Kirsten Osbourne

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About the Author

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Chapter 1

Gertrude Sanders sighed as she stared at several books scattered across a table. She walked over and picked each of them up, returning them to their rightful positions on the shelves. As she passed by, a few of the children at the next table whispered and giggled.

“Shh!” Gertrude hissed. She pointed to the sign she’d lettered in perfect cursive script: “Quiet in the Library.” She didn’t understand what was so hard about keeping your voice low in a place where people read and studied.

Still, she had to admit that her job was perfect. She kept a tight ship, posting all rules and regulations and enforcing them daily. She helped children do their homework after school or find new adventures in the stacks.

At the beginning of each month, she sent away for a shipment of new books, and today was the day that they’d arrived in a wooden crate. She walked back to her desk and opened the package. She took out the first book, checking it thoroughly to ensure there was no damage in the shipping process. Next, she pulled out her bronze-handled stamp, pressed it onto an inkpad, and carefully applied it to the inside of each book, “Property of the Nowhere Library.” In careful letters, she printed the title of the book—*The Emerald City of Oz*, author, L. Frank Baum—onto a card. She walked over to the card catalog, opened the correct drawer, and slipped the card into the appropriate place.

Before she had closed the drawer, she heard a loud creaking noise outside. A few of the children rushed to the window of the small, single-room library. Loud strums of music drifted through the window, and the children began to laugh and point outside.

“If you aren’t quiet, I’ll have to ask you to leave!” Gertrude strode over to the children. It was almost the end of the day, too late for more packages or visitors. She had no idea who would be outside the library, let alone playing music. The nerve of it all!

Gertrude peered out the window. Just in front of the library was a large wagon covered in colorful ribbons. A good-looking man dressed in brown slacks and a white shirt was holding a banjo and singing.

One horse munched on an apple while another one strained at its harness, both attached to a post outside the library. Painted on the side of the wagon was a single word: Books.

Gertrude marched outside of the library, hands on her hips, and approached the intruder. "This is a *library*!"

The stranger simply smiled and kept strumming his banjo.

Gertrude couldn't believe how rude the man was. "You cannot play music here! We need quiet so people can read and study!"

Finally, the stranger stopped playing the banjo and stared deep into Gertrude's eyes. "What's your name?"

Gertrude was shocked at the question. She didn't see why it mattered. "I'm Gertrude Sanders."

The stranger grinned, and Gertrude found herself being distracted by his beautiful eyes. They were open and honest, and Gertrude got the feeling he was a close friend, although they'd never met before. He did a little bow for her. "Jedediah Thorn at your service, Miss Sanders. You can call me Jed."

Gertrude frowned. She had no tolerance for whatever foolery this man was up to. She heard a few giggles behind her and swirled her head. A few of the children had followed her outside and were watching the adults carefully. "Go back inside and get back to work! Mr. Thorn will be on his way soon!"

The children quieted and looked at each other before scurrying back into the library. They knew Gertrude was serious. Gertrude turned her gaze back to Jed Thorn.

"Gertrude—a lovely name for a lovely woman. I am only here to make you happy." Jed touched a hand to Gertrude's arm, and she stiffened.

"What do you mean by that?" Gertrude felt her stomach flutter with excitement and her pulse quicken. She tried to keep her tone sharp.

"Many people like to hear music while they read. It relaxes them. Or they can stop by and read one of the books I've picked up on my travels."

Gertrude could feel red creeping into her face. Who did this man think he was? "They don't need one of your books. They have a perfectly good library right here. I get books in every month."

"I wouldn't dream of interfering with that. Gertrude, tell me... what's your story?"

Gertrude was now fully taken aback. "I must ask you to move your wagon immediately, sir."

"Just a few words, and I'll be out of your hair. What brought you here to Nowhere?" Jed stared directly into Gertrude's eyes.

"I don't see how that's pertinent." Gertrude smoothed a hand

through her hair, feeling extremely self-conscious.

"Please. I promise, I'll stop bothering you." Jed's eyes shimmered. He was enjoying himself.

"I moved here from New York with my sisters a few years back. We were adopted by Cletus Sanders and his wife, Edna Petunia."

Jed nodded and whistled. "So you know what it's like to go to a new place and be taken in by kindness and hospitality."

Gertrude opened her mouth to protest, but she couldn't think of a good retort. "Okay. I've told you about myself. Now will you leave?"

"Why the library?" Jed loved watching Gertrude's face. It displayed her impatience and anger. She was beautiful when she frowned, her hair framing her face and making Jed dream about a day when he could make her smile. He'd never met anyone quite like her before. He was pretty sure women as saucy as Gertrude didn't exist.

Gertrude drew herself up to her full height, standing as tall as she could, even though Jed had several inches on her. "Mr. Thorn, I have a job to do. A responsibility and obligation to the time. Please move along with your little cart."

Jed nearly laughed out loud. "How about I take you for a ride on this cart after you finish up here for the day?" He gestured at his horses, who were happily grazing at the post.

Gertrude looked horrified. "Absolutely not."

"A man can try, can't he?" Jed grinned. The woman was certainly going to be a challenge for him, but he was up to the task.

"I need to get back inside. But a promise is a promise. You said you'd move your wagon." Gertrude stared at him with her sternest expression, usually reserved for only the most mischievous of children.

"One more question before I leave."

Gertrude didn't like it, but felt she had no choice. "What?"

"Why did you choose to become a librarian?"

Gertrude thought for a moment. "It's because I like rules and structure and order. And in my library, we have all of those things. And that's why you need to leave."

Jed simply smiled. "Thank you, Gertrude. I hope you have a nice evening, now." He picked up one of her hands and brought his lips to it, lingering a moment longer than he needed to.

As Jed touched his lips to her skin, Gertrude felt something she'd never experienced before, a tingling that started in her stomach and seemed to catch every inch of her on fire. Startled, she snapped her hand back and hurried into the library. She didn't look back until she was safely inside. Jed hitched his horses to the wagon and took off with a silly wave to the children inside.

The children were abuzz with excitement. A few of the adults in the library also seemed amused.

“Who was that?”

“I like his hair!”

“I like his music!”

“He seems nice.”

“I wonder what books he has!”

“*Quiet!*” Gertrude stomped her foot, and the library went silent. She glared reproachfully at each library patron. “We have a half hour until closing. Please see me if you need to borrow any books.” Gertrude walked back to her desk and sank down wearily. She was exhausted from dealing with the mysterious stranger. At least he was gone now...hopefully, she’d never have to deal with him again.

The remaining half hour passed uneventfully. Gertrude helped the patrons borrow books, then closed and locked the door when she left. She set off for the Sanders’ house, a twenty-minute walk from the library, and enjoyed the cool day, typical of a Nowhere winter. Unlike New York, where they’d had to deal with the freezing cold and snow, Nowhere’s climate was warmer. Gertrude no longer had to worry about the bone-chilling days when she’d felt she would never be warm again. She admired the stillness of the early evening as the residents of Nowhere went back to their homes and ate dinner with their families. Everything was just as it should be.

When she returned home, the Sanders’ house was bustling as usual. Gertrude didn’t mind it. Though she could be strict and stern with her sisters, she really did love them—all of them—even when they were driving her crazy. When things got too hectic in the large household, she was almost always able to slip away with a book and take some time for herself.

Theresa and Hattie, two of the youngest girls the Sanders had adopted, greeted her at the front door. “Edna Petunia’s making chicken-fried steak tonight!” Theresa called out happily.

“That sounds delicious.” Gertrude smiled. She appreciated the schedule the family had worked out. Although there were many mouths to feed, each orphan was assigned a turn to help Edna Petunia in the kitchen, which meant dinner was always ready on time and no one went hungry. There had been times in the orphanage in New York when some of the older girls had to go without because of food shortages and crises. Gertrude was happy that those days were gone.

Although it was Katie’s turn to help with cooking, Gertrude set the table. She liked making sure that all of the silverware was set just right. Not all of her sisters had her sharp eye for detail.

Gertrude set ten places at the table because there were no other expected dinner guests. Though there were fifteen orphans, seven of her sisters had married, starting families and households of their own.

Ruby and Opal were twins who both had young ones of their own,

as well as children they'd adopted. Evelyn, Betsy, Penny, Sarah Jane, and Dorothy had also married and moved away from the Sanders' home. They all saw each other each Sunday at the local church, where Sarah Jane's husband, Micah, presided. They also got together for many occasions. It seemed that with so many family members, someone was almost always giving birth or adopting another child, and they enjoyed spending time with the growing brood.

Edna Petunia stirred the pieces of chicken-fried steak in the pan, creating a sizzling sound. She was responsible for taking the orphans in. A spunky, spirited woman in her seventies, she'd lost her first love decades ago and thought she'd end up alone. Then, in her golden years, she'd met offbeat, intelligent Cletus Sanders and he'd swept her off her feet.

The two had married, and though Cletus had thought they'd be childless, Edna Petunia had insisted upon adopting the fifteen bastard orphans as soon as she'd heard their plight. Removed from their only home, they'd been sent to Nowhere to start a new life, but plans had fallen through and they'd been left with nothing. Their matron, Cassie Hayes, had searched desperately to find a home for the girls. But Edna Petunia had saved the day, opening her and Cletus's home to all of the girls at once. Gertrude and her sisters were still eternally grateful to the Sanders for allowing them not to be split up.

Cletus came in now, carrying a folded up newspaper. He licked his lips. "That smells heavenly. I'm a lucky man." He swatted Edna Petunia on the bottom with the newspaper and she giggled. Gertrude shook her head. Cletus and Edna Petunia still acted like newlyweds and weren't embarrassed about it.

Gertrude's tastes were more restrained. While she enjoyed reading stories of romance and true love, she felt those things were best left for books and fairy tales. She'd never met a man in real life who made her feel any of those things. She found her mind drifting to Jed Thorn and quickly tried to think of something else—anything else.

Though many of her sisters had married, and surely even more would marry in the future, she was content to continue her life as a single woman. She had a wonderful home and a supportive family. Her work at the library was fulfilling to her. Each week, she had faith and worship at her church. All in all, she had a wonderful life. She didn't need a man to complicate or ruin it. Especially not a man with a banjo.

Gertrude's face wore a pained expression as she realized she was thinking of Jed Thorn again.

"Are you all right, Gertie?" Hope put a concerned hand to Gertie's head.

"I'm fine. I was just thinking of a nuisance today at the library."

Everyone took their places at the dinner table, and Katie portioned out servings of the chicken fried steak. Edna Petunia scooped out creamy mashed potatoes to go along with it.

“What happened? One of those kids giving you trouble?” Cletus asked.

“Worse. It was a grown man.”

Everyone’s eyes swiveled to Gertrude. A man misbehaving at the library was unusual.

“Someone named Jedediah Thorn showed up with a traveling book wagon. Have you ever heard of such a thing?” Gertrude spoke her words crossly.

“I saw him!” Katie shouted excitedly. “I was rushing to the mercantile to pick up some potatoes for dinner, and there was a wagon covered in ribbons rolling along Main Street. He was quite handsome.”

Gertrude bit her lip. “That has nothing to do with anything, Katie. He’s a very rude man.”

“What’d he try?” Cletus went into overprotective father mode. Though he hadn’t been with the girls since their births, he fiercely defended them as if they were his biological children. Everyone in town knew that no one treated the Sanders girls badly, because they’d have Cletus to answer to.

“Nothing like that, though he did ask me to go for a ride on his wagon.”

Hattie looked at Theresa and giggled. Grumpy Gertie, riding on a colorful book wagon? It was almost too much to bear.

Gertrude continued with a stern look at her younger sisters. “He was causing a big commotion outside of the library. He was playing some terrible song on a banjo. Thankfully, he left. Hopefully I won’t have to see him again.”

Edna Petunia frowned. “A man with a traveling book wagon. Now, that’s certainly something you don’t see every day. I wonder where he sleeps at night!

“Maybe in the forest.” Cletus looked at Edna Petunia and grinned. Gertrude couldn’t help but roll her eyes. She loved her parents, but sometimes, they were positively unbearable.

Chapter 2

Gertrude unlocked the library doors at a quarter to eight in the morning. She kept a strict routine; waking early for breakfast and morning chores, reading her latest book for a few minutes in the formal parlor, then walking the few blocks to the library. She liked to be there early so she could prepare for the day.

Gertrude busied herself with dusting the bookshelves. It was unbelievable how dirty they could get from day to day. As she straightened the spines of each book and polished the shelves, she heard the unmistakable sound of a banjo outside the window.

Still holding the duster, she flew out of the library in a rage. Jed Thorn and his wagon were stationed a few yards further away from the library than they had been the day before. Already, a crowd of children was clustered around him.

“Sing more, Uncle Jed!”

“The one about the monkey!”

“Will you read us a book next?”

Gertrude was horrified. “I asked you to move your wagon away from the library.”

Jed stopped playing the banjo, winked at the children, and turned his attention to Gertrude. “My, my, Miss Sanders...you look mighty nice today.”

Gertrude blushed despite herself, then got even more angry. “This is a quiet place, Mr. Thorn. I see that you can’t understand that, but I won’t allow you to ruin it for everyone else.”

Jed didn’t look upset in the slightest. “Why don’t you join us? I’m sure you have a lovely singing voice. Don’t you want her to join us, kids?”

The children began laughing. A little boy named Peter tugged at Gertrude’s hand. “Please, please, Miss Sanders!”

“Absolutely not. We have reading hour on Friday mornings, and today is Tuesday. That’s not on the schedule. And we’re outside. We’re not in the library!” Gertrude couldn’t believe what was happening. All of her rules and structure were now in chaos. “Again, Mr. Thorn, I demand you move your wagon. You promised me.”

“I did promise you, Miss Sanders. And my word is good. Yesterday I pulled up my wagon over there.” Jed pointed to the spot the wagon had inhabited the day before. “Today, I drove the wagon to this place. So I did move the wagon.”

The children erupted in a huge peal of laughter. No one had ever had the gall to speak to Miss Sanders this way. They’d never seen her so upset.

Gertrude took a deep breath. She refused to allow Jed Thorn to make a mockery of her library and her rules. “I hope you’ll move your wagon, Mr. Thorn. But if you don’t, you will hear from the authorities.” Gertrude strode back into the library, her head held high.

When she got back to her desk, she felt like crying. Who did that man think he was? She’d run the library in a very specific way since she had taken it over a few years back. Everyone was happy with it. There was nothing wrong with it. So why did Jed Thorn think he had a right to interfere with everything she’d built?

Gertrude took a deep breath and checked her face in the mirror hanging on the wall next to her desk. She tried to relax and focus on her daily tasks. There were lists to be made, references to check, and books to be shelved. She didn’t need to think about Jed Thorn or his silly banjo and colorful wagon.

The morning was a quiet one; most of the children who had been outside disappeared to go to the Nowhere school house. A few of the regular patrons came in and checked out books. Gertrude couldn’t help but notice that many of them stopped by the book wagon on their way into or out of the library. It made her angry, but she knew there was not much she could do about it.

At noon, the library was completely empty. Gertrude stared out the window and saw that a huge group of people were circled around Jed. He strummed his banjo and sang a ballad about a man who had lost his way and the woman who loved him. Gertrude found herself being moved by the music—regardless of what type of man he was, there was no denying he had an incredible voice.

Frustrated, Gertrude decided to eat her lunch in the small broom closet at the back of the library. It was cramped and dark, but when she shut the door, she could no longer hear the strains of banjo music or the laughter that floated through the air.

Gertrude thought long and hard about how to get Jed Thorn out of her hair. There had to be a solution. The people of Nowhere relied on the library for a quiet place to read and study. There was no way they would be able to do that with Jed carrying on so noisily just outside the window.

Throughout the afternoon, a few people passed in and out of the library. Gertrude helped them check out books or use the card catalog

to find what they were looking for. Many of them went back outside after a short while, and Gertrude could see them talking and laughing with Jed. Gertrude could feel herself growing angrier and angrier as the minutes passed.

When the school day ended around three o'clock, Gertrude saw a flock of children swarm all around Jed. They climbed in and out of his wagon as if it were a tree, sat on his knee, and played with his hat and banjo. Jed seemed to take it all in stride, strumming along and starting to sing again.

Gertrude tried to focus on her work in the library. There was a small chalkboard near the back of the room, so she decided to clean the erasers. She walked out the door and stood toward the side of the library building so no one would notice her. She clapped the erasers together and a cloud of dust filled the air. She could hear Jed's banjo and frowned.

"Sing it again, Uncle Jed!"

"I want to play the banjo!"

Jed caught sight of Gertrude's hair glistening in the sun. "Wait for me a moment, children." He handed his banjo to a little boy standing next to him and hurried over to where Gertrude stood clapping erasers.

"Need a hand?" Jed strode toward Gertrude and gestured at the erasers.

Gertrude shook her head. "No."

"Please. It's the least I can do." Jed looked deep into Gertrude's eyes, and she could feel her determination melting. She shrugged her shoulders and handed over the erasers.

Jed walked a few feet away from Gertrude and gave the erasers a few hearty claps, then walked back to her. He pressed the erasers back into her hands and held on for a few moments longer than was necessary.

Gertrude felt as if her hands were on fire the moment Jed touched her. She took a step back.

A look of concern flashed across Jed's face. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Gertrude swallowed.

"I want you to know it's not my intent to disrupt you. I think I can help you." Jed's expression was earnest.

Gertrude wasn't sure what to feel. "I don't need your help. I can manage just fine without your wagon and horses and banjo."

Jed smiled. "I admire your forthright nature. Have you always been this way?"

"For as long as I can remember. Have you always been this irritating?" As much as it made people crazy, she wasn't one to not speak her mind. Honesty was the only policy as far as Gertrude was

concerned.

Jed let out a big rumble of laughter. "You're one of a kind, Gertrude Sanders. Has anyone ever told you that?"

Gertrude composed herself, looking away from Jed and toward the children, who were still shouting and playing outside the wagon. "That's not relevant to our conversation. The children need to do their homework. You're disrupting them."

"Hmm." Jed stepped back and looked at Gertrude thoughtfully.

"What are you staring at?"

"Just wondering something." Jed's eyes danced playfully.

"What?"

"I'm wondering if you're always this pretty, or if it's only when you're mad."

"I'm afraid you aren't likely to find out, because I seem to always be mad when you're around. And I don't see that changing." Gertrude knew she was being harsh with Jed, but the man needed to understand that she was a woman of principle. She was not someone who was going to simply set aside all of her rules and processes just because a man with a banjo had come to town.

"That's quite all right with me. I'm content just to be near you." Jed's words were sweet and his eyes were kind. All Gertrude could think about was the way his hands had felt around hers. They were warm and strong, and she wanted to feel them there again.

"I should get back inside to my tasks." Gertrude looked back toward the library.

"You seem like a woman who likes to be busy." Jed's tone grew bolder.

Gertrude was taken aback. "Yes, that's right. It's a lot of work, but I enjoy it."

"Let me help you get these back inside." Jed walked to the library entrance and held the door open for Gertrude. Before she even realized what was happening, she'd followed him into the library and put the erasers back at the chalkboard. She dusted her hands off on the skirt of her dress. Fortunately, it was a deep brown color that hid the dust well.

Gertrude and Jed stared at each other uncomfortably. Gertrude bit her lip and found a stack of books that one of the patrons had returned that morning. She began to put each book where it belonged on the shelves. She strained to put a book back on the top shelf.

"Let me give you a hand with that." Jed stepped behind her and reached his long, lean arms over hers and guided her hand to the top. Gertrude's heart began racing. The feeling of Jed's body behind her was new and exciting—and terrifying. Gertrude swiveled around.

"Excuse me. I think you should leave now. I have a lot of work to

do.”

“I’ll go. But before I do answer me one question. Do you feel anything for me? Anything at all? Because Gertrude Sanders, I feel a whole lot of things for you.” Jed grabbed her hands as he gave his impassioned speech.

Gertrude wanted to tell him how she was feeling, but she knew it wouldn’t be appropriate. She felt she was going to burst with all of the longing and excitement that was swirling through her entire body. She fought to keep her face neutral. “I don’t think that’s relevant.”

A huge grin spread across Jed’s face. “That’s all I needed to hear. I’ll be outside if you need anything.”

Gertrude was baffled. “What do you have to smile about?”

“You didn’t answer my question. That means you have something to hide. And that gives me hope. Not much, but some. And that’s enough for now.” Jed was practically dancing out the door. He would probably start to sing about it soon.

Gertrude sighed. She couldn’t think up a clever response before he walked out the door. The man was going to be the death of her.

* * *

THAT EVENING, Gertrude was unusually quiet. After dinner, she and Katie went upstairs to her bedroom and Gertrude began to braid the younger girl’s hair. Katie talked on and on about her new job helping out their sister Ruby at the mercantile.

When Cletus and Edna Petunia had taken in the girls, they had explained that they all either needed to do volunteer work, go to school, or earn a wage. Although they had plenty of money to spare—even after taking in fifteen orphans—they refused to let the girls grow idle.

Gertrude tried to pay attention to Katie’s stories, but had trouble focusing. She kept thinking about the slight wave in Jed’s hair and the spark she’d felt when he’d leaned over her to help her reach the highest shelf.

“Gertie! Are you even listening to me?” Katie turned around and Gertrude let go of the braid she was working on.

Gertrude snapped back to attention. “Katie, you moved your head! Now I have to start all over.”

Katie pouted. Before Gertrude could think of anything else to say, Edna Petunia burst into the room. Gertrude thought about remarking upon the fact that Edna Petunia never knocked on the doors, even to bedrooms, but decided against it. Edna Petunia was who she was, and she wasn’t likely to change, especially at her age.

“I came up here to find out what is going on with you, Gertrude.” Edna Petunia put her hands on her hip. Gertrude recognized the look on her face. She knew her adoptive mother would not leave the room until she got the whole story. “You were too quiet at dinner. I can tell whenever something is upsetting one of my bastards.”

It used to bother Gertrude that Edna Petunia referred to the orphans as bastards, but she’d learned that it was all a part of the woman’s quirky personality. Now, she barely batted an eye when Edna Petunia used the term. She knew it was said affectionately.

“I’m fine. It’s nothing.” Gertrude concentrated on Katie’s hair. She didn’t feel like explaining herself to Edna Petunia. She was an adult... she wasn’t quite sure why she was expected to constantly explain herself, anyway.

“Gertrude Sanders, you know lying to me won’t do you any good. Come right out with it.” Edna Petunia plopped herself down onto the bed next to Katie. The younger girl giggled.

“I really don’t want to talk about it.” Gertrude didn’t want to explain all of her confusing feelings to Edna Petunia. Although the woman had always been accepting of her and her sisters, surely the older woman wouldn’t approve of all the thoughts Gertrude was having about Jed.

“Peppermint stick?” Edna Petunia leaned over and pulled a peppermint stick from her bosom. Gertrude wrinkled her nose and shook her head. She knew where that peppermint stick had been!

“I may be a crazy old woman, but you can tell me what’s troubling you.” Edna Petunia stared at Gertrude until the young woman finally began talking.

Gertrude didn’t know how to explain her situation. “It’s just...that man with the book wagon?”

“Yes, you mentioned him the other night at dinner.”

“He’s driving me up a wall. He’s constantly there at the library. I want him to go away, but he won’t. And he also—well, he also...” Gertrude could feel her face flushing with embarrassment. Katie snickered, then coughed to hide it.

“He also what? If he hurt one of my bastards...why, I’ll go down to that wagon of his and—” Now Edna Petunia’s face was turning red. She and Cletus did not do well when anyone or anything bothered one of their girls.

Gertrude thought fast about what she wanted to say. “No, nothing like that. It’s just that he made it seem like he fancied me. That’s all.” She looked down, a bit embarrassed. No man had fancied her. She’d watched all her sisters marry, but not one man had ever approached her.

“Hmm.” Edna Petunia snorted. “I know you’ve got more sense on

you than to gallivant with a man in a traveling book wagon.”

Gertrude thought about this for a moment and laughed. “You’re right. Plus, I’m pretty sure he lives in that book wagon.”

Katie’s eyes grew wide. “He lives in a wagon? How can that be?”

“I don’t know for sure.” Gertrude thought a man had to be truly mad if he lived in his wagon.

“When I first met Cletus, he lived in the woods.” Edna Petunia sighed as she reminisced.

That settles it, Gertrude thought to herself. Jed is definitely insane.

Chapter 3

The morning sun was bright and clear as Jed climbed out of his wagon and stretched his arms. It looked like it would be a beautiful day in Nowhere. He opened one of the tin cans of beans he kept in his wagon for breakfast. He sat outside of the wagon and watched the clouds float by as he ate his food.

He couldn't wait to see Gertrude again. He could not stop thinking about the woman. She was bold and brash, and he loved that about her. He never knew exactly what she was going to say or do.

To his surprise, instead of Gertrude, an elderly couple pulled up next to him in a wagon of their own. They hopped out of their wagon and marched up to him.

"You must be the man giving our Gertie a hard time," Cletus accused.

"You'll leave our daughter alone, if you have any sense at all," Edna Petunia added, glancing at the stranger in the wagon. She had to admit, he was quite handsome.

Jed's wary expression brightened. "You're Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders? I've heard about you."

Edna Petunia only glared at him. "Don't believe everything you hear in this town." Jed watched as she reached a hand into her bosom and brought it out again, carrying a peppermint stick. She crunched on it noisily as they continued talking.

"Thing is, son, you're trespassing. This is county-owned land." Cletus puffed out his chest and gazed at Jed sternly.

"With all due respect, sir, I don't believe I am."

Cletus frowned. As Nowhere's town judge and an overprotective father of fifteen girls, he wasn't used to his authority being challenged. "What do you mean by that?"

"I checked the map of county property. From here until the farm next door is all public land. The plot of land where the library sits is county land. But this here is public. Therefore, I believe I'm entitled to park my wagon here if need be."

Cletus looked taken aback, but didn't say anything. Edna Petunia sprung into action. "If need be? Why exactly does a man of your age

need to sleep in a wagon?"

Jed grinned. "It's less that I *need* to sleep in a wagon and more that I choose to do it. I enjoy being outside and having the freedom to go where I so choose."

Despite himself, Cletus was nodding his head. "Before I settled down, I lived in the woods. That's where I first met this woman, and then she made me the happiest man in the world." Cletus leaned over to kiss Edna Petunia right on the mouth, and Jed looked away politely.

Once they had finished, he stood up straight and looked each of them in the eye. "I'm glad you came to call on me, because I have been wanting to meet you. You've raised a mighty fine young woman—"

Edna Petunia let out a little whoop. "Of course we did! And they're all like that!"

"—and I intend to marry her." As soon as Jed said the words, he felt a pit of fear in his stomach. What if Gertrude's parents disapproved? It was too soon. They didn't even know him yet.

But fortunately for him, Cletus laughed and patted him on the back. "I appreciate your honesty, son."

"Our daughters, all of them, will marry for love and nothing less. Gertie has a fine head on her shoulders...and as you know, she does not tolerate foolishness. What makes you think you could provide for her?" Edna Petunia asked sharply.

"I'm glad you asked me that. I've been lucky over the years, building a small income from my business. I've never married, and I don't drink or spend money on frivolous things. I bought this wagon outright, so I'm not in any debt. The only expenses I have are for feeding my horses and donating a small amount to my church." Jed looked at Cletus and Edna Petunia nervously. He hoped that would be enough to convince them he was worthy of their daughter. He knew he had a long way to go—he still needed to convince Gertrude—but this would be a major step.

Cletus nodded, satisfied. Edna Petunia was impressed, but wasn't about to let Jed off the hook so easily. "How would you feel about an engagement that lasted a year or longer?"

Jed swallowed. "I think that would be up to Gertrude. I don't see a problem with it."

"I was once a young man myself, son. Are you sure your manly urges won't take over and make you do something you'll regret?" Cletus stared at the young man, as if he could read his intentions.

Jed was a very open person, but he wasn't sure how to answer this question. He felt almost any answer he could give would get him in trouble.

Fortunately, Edna Petunia chimed in. "You see, Jed, all I want to do is be able to give one of my bastards a perfect wedding."

Jed coughed suddenly. "Excuse me, ma'am...did you just say 'bastards'?"

Edna Petunia was on a roll. "Yes, I did. All I want to do is arrange the flowers and the dress and the food and make everything nice for my girls, but every single one of them who has gotten married so far has betrayed me. They've all had very short engagements, getting married with barely any notice or time to plan a thing! So you'll understand, Mr. Thorn, when I say a very long engagement. Understood?"

Jed nodded his head firmly. "Yes, ma'am. I understand completely."

"Well, then. I think I've heard everything I needed to hear." Edna Petunia smiled approvingly at Jed.

"I agree." Cletus was admiring one of the books on Jed's cart, a thick volume about the Civil War. He held up the book. "How much for this book, son?"

"For you, Mr. Sanders, no charge today. I appreciate you coming out here to visit me and listening to everything I have to say. You know, I'll be perfectly honest. There are many people who see me driving up in my book wagon who think I'm odd or a crazy person. So the book is yours, as a token of my gratitude for your kindness." Jed smiled at the older man. He already felt a kinship with the man, though he'd only known him for a few minutes.

"Thank you, son. I'll gladly pay, though. I don't need any special favors." As town judge, Cletus never wanted to appear like he was taking bribes from citizens. He held the book out to Jed.

"No, I insist. Thank you for your offer, sir." Jed pressed the book back into Cletus's hands.

"Well, thank you very much, son. We'd best be going now." Cletus extended his arm and gave Jed a hearty handshake. Jed smiled.

Edna Petunia threw her arms around Jed. "Good luck with Gertie. She's a tough nut to crack, but you'll be very happy when you do finally get there. Trust me, I should know. I waited nearly fifty years to find my true love!"

With that, Cletus gave Edna Petunia another kiss directly on the lips, right in front of Jed. He was oddly charmed by the strange couple, but he couldn't believe how forward they were with their affection for each other. He chuckled to himself and dropped his head, feeling a little uncomfortable.

Cletus and Edna Petunia headed back to their wagon. Jed watched as they set off into the distance. He checked his pocket watch. He thought Gertrude would arrive any moment.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, Gertrude came into view. She stared straight ahead, not turning to say hello or even look at him. Jed sighed. She was going to be a difficult one to win over, but he had to find a way to show her how much she meant to him. There had to be something he could do to convince her to give him a chance.

Gertrude pretended that she hadn't seen Jed. She was fuming that the wagon was still outside the library. She had hoped that sooner or later, Jed would get bored and find a new place to park his wagon. She knew it would continue to be a distraction for all of the library patrons.

That morning, a large number of Nowhere residents showed up in the library, and Gertrude was pleased. Maybe the novelty and excitement of the book wagon had worn off and everyone had decided to return to the dependable, reliable library. In any case, Gertrude was thrilled that everyone was back.

She helped old Martha Ramsey search for home remedies for a bad cough, found law books for a young man interested in becoming a lawyer, and re-shelved all the returned books from the previous evening and that morning. By the time she was done with her morning chores, it was time for lunch.

To Gertrude's dismay, she saw many of her library patrons go outside to join a circle. Children from the school drifted in and crowded around Jed. Gertrude listened as his music filtered in through the windows. When she couldn't take it anymore, she went into the closet and slammed the door shut so she could be alone with her thoughts.

She didn't understand why he had to be so difficult. It was bad enough that he was parked outside her library. But to also make a commotion every single day while people inside the library tried to study? That seemed unnecessary.

Still, despite her annoyance and frustration, Gertrude found herself imagining what Jed's hands would do if they were allowed to run up and down the lengths of her body. She shivered at the thought with excitement, then tried to shove the feeling away. *I will not fall for Jedediah Thorn*, she promised herself.

* * *

AS GERTRUDE LEFT the library that evening, Jed got out of his wagon and joined her, walking in step right next to her. Gertrude stopped and turned to face him.

"What are you doing?" Gertrude demanded.

Jed gave her a sunny smile. "Walking you home."

Gertrude seemed too shocked for words. "That's not necessary."

"I know. I'm doing it because I want to." Jed was wearing a knowing grin, but Gertrude only felt confused.

"Why are you doing this?" Gertrude finally blurted out.

Jed looked surprised. "Doing what?"

"Staying outside of my library. It seems like you are trying to make me mad." Gertrude knew she was being harsh. Some of her sisters had teased her or made fun of her for her direct nature, but she was glad that she wasn't afraid to speak her mind.

"It's certainly not my intention to make you mad. Quite the opposite, in fact." Jed took Gertrude's arm in his.

Gertrude's heart began to beat faster. She thought about pulling away, but it felt nice to walk arm in arm with Jed. She took a few deep breaths to steady herself. "Then what is your intention?"

"I'd like to marry you." The words flew out of Jed's mouth before he even realized he was talking. He wished he had thought of a more romantic way to make this proposal. Talking about it seemed so cold and impersonal. He should have made her a nice picnic dinner or brought her a gift with a note that outlined his question. He found himself reconsidering all his actions around her. Was she simply going to reject him and run away? He hoped not, but it was a possibility.

Gertrude's heart leaped. She couldn't believe that the handsome man was asking her to marry him. She had a fleeting glimpse of what their wedding night might be like, and then forced herself to think of something else. But she had to admit, she was curious. Still, she knew how she had to respond.

"Mr. Thorn, I don't even know you. You might be able to play the banjo well, but what do you know about being a husband and a father?" Gertrude tried to remain calm, but her tone was partially accusing.

Jed grinned again. "You'd like to have babies with me? Well, that's great news. How soon can we start?"

Gertrude was horrified. "Mr. Thorn! I've never met a man who spoke so inappropriately." Secretly, she was thrilled, but she couldn't let him know that.

"Do you like it?" Jed asked with a smirk.

Gertrude glared at him. "No."

Jed burst out laughing. "I'm sorry, Gertie—can I call you that?—but you are truly lovely when you are mad."

Gertrude continued to stare at him with a gloomy expression, but something within her shifted. As she stared into Jed's eyes and saw his smile, she began to relax, and that made her start to laugh. It started as a low rumble and changed into a deep, belly-aching laugh for a few minutes.

At first, Jed simply stared at her in confusion. Then he joined in, too, until both of them were laughing wildly, tears streaming down their faces.

A piece of hair had slipped into Gertrude's face. Jed leaned down and brushed it behind one of her ears. "See? Laughing with you is my favorite part of any day. If you accept my proposal, we could do this every day," Jed said softly.

Gertrude could feel a yearning stirring deep within her. Jed was handsome and funny and talented. But marriage was a huge commitment. Plus, there was the small matter that Jed lived in a traveling book wagon. How would he ever be able to support a wife—and eventually children—in a wagon? It was too much to bear.

"No, I can't. I'm sorry." Gertrude pulled away from Jed's arm and began hurrying to the Sanders house.

"Wait for me!" Jed called. He chased after her. He was breathing hard by the time he had finally caught up. "Gertrude, I know I drive you crazy. But please think about my offer. That's all I'm asking. For you to think about it."

Gertrude nodded. "I see."

"Truth is, I've never met anyone quite like you. And I've met a lot of people in my travels." Jed knew he had to convince her. He wasn't sure how, but he thought it couldn't hurt to explain all the things he loved and enjoyed about her. "You're not only beautiful, but you're kind and smart. You help children and other library patrons every day. You're exactly the type of woman I'm looking for."

"How will you settle down if you're chasing after places in that contraption?" Grace finally had an outburst.

Jed looked at his wagon and smiled. "The wagon? She's been my faithful companion for years. But if it meant giving up the wagon for you, I'd find a way to do it, Gertrude. That's how serious I am about you and our future life together."

Gertrude swallowed hard. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She tried not to get her hopes up, but they were already climbing. "You would?"

Jed turned to her and tilted her chin toward his. "For you, Gertrude? I'd do anything."

Gertrude was silent for a few moments. "Wow. You've given me a lot to think about. It's going to take me some time before I can come up with a halfway-decent response." Everything inside her yearned to say yes, but her practical mind couldn't allow that. Not yet.

Jed nodded. "That's understandable. I'll be waiting impatiently while you make up your mind, though." He laughed to show he was teasing.

When they got to the door of the Sanders house, Jed leaned down

and kissed her gently on the cheek. Gertrude felt the tender caress of his lips on her skin and her body cried out for more.

“Good night, Miss Sanders.” Jed squeezed her hand.

“Good night, Mr. Thorn.” Gertrude could feel her heart pounding as she slipped inside and closed the door. What was she doing with the man?

Chapter 4

Friday afternoons were normally Gertrude's favorite part of the week. The children would get out of school early, come to the library, and gather around her. She was reading to them week by week out of a long book about fairy tales and adventures. The kids loved it. They would act out parts of the book and beg Gertrude to do the same.

At noon, Gertrude was puzzled when she realized that there were almost no children inside the library. They were normally released from school and gathered around in a circle, waiting for Gertrude to begin. She frowned and looked out the window.

A crowd of people of all ages had encircled Jed...and *he* was reading a book out loud to the group! Infuriated, Gertrude went outside and marched right up to Jed. A few of the children jumped out of the way. They could tell that she was not in the mood for fun and games.

"*What* are you doing?" Gertrude asked.

"Hi, Gertrude. Can we all say, 'Hi, Miss Sanders!'"

"Hi, Miss Sanders!" The children in the audience cried out in a sing-song voice.

Gertrude couldn't believe what was happening. She'd thought that after their strange talk the evening before, Jed would understand what it meant to her that order and structure be maintained in the library at all times. Yet here he was deliberately breaking every rule in the book.

"I cannot believe you!" Gertrude shouted with a flash of irritation. She ran back into the library, which was completely deserted. She would think of a way to get back at Jed Thorn. There had to be a way.

Only three patrons visited the library for the rest of the afternoon, and Gertrude felt like crying. On the one hand, it was quiet, and she was able to brainstorm what rights she had to get Jed to move his wagon. On the other hand, she found herself missing the steady chatter and giggles of the schoolchildren. Even though she constantly found herself reprimanding them, she found that she missed having them there.

By the end of the day, Gertrude knew what she needed to do. She

stayed later than usual to make signs that she hung all over the library. The signs read: "Anyone who visits the book wagon may not check out books from the Nowhere Library."

Gertrude knew her actions were extreme, but she felt it was necessary given how disruptive Jed and his wagon were to her library. She worried that the children would fall behind in their schoolwork if they continued to play and sing with Jed instead of studying.

When she had finished posting the signs, she looked out the window to see if Jed was outside. Fortunately, he was not. She tidied her desk and gathered her things, then went outside and locked up for the evening. She glanced at the wagon a few more times to make sure Jed wasn't nearby, then walked back to the Sanders house. She hoped that tomorrow would be a better day at the library.

She still had no idea how to respond to Jed's proposal, either. Although she was curious about what it would be like to be someone's wife, to be Jed's wife, she was also scared by it. She had been single her entire life, and she had assumed she would remain single. The idea that her life could be intertwined with someone else's was rather terrifying.

Though she knew that her sisters who had married were very happy with their lives, she just didn't see herself in the same way. She had never considered the possibility of children. Though she enjoyed her work helping children, and despite the occasional complaint, she also liked spending time with her nieces and nephews. She had never really thought of herself as the mothering type.

Gertrude looked at the clock. If she hurried, she could make a trip to see one of her favorite sisters, Penny, at the farm between Nowhere and Bagley and be back before bedtime. She felt like she needed Penny's advice. She needed to tell someone what was going on or she might explode with frustration.

Gertrude rushed down the stairs and nearly ran into Theresa.

"Where are you going?" The younger girl's eyes were inquisitive.

Gertrude thought quickly. "I need to take something to Penny."

"But you're not carrying anything." Theresa's brow furrowed.

Gertrude smiled at Theresa. She was the most observant of the Sanders sisters. "You're right. I'm going to pick something up from Penny. She's making me some clothes."

Theresa's face brightened. "Ooh, can I come with you?"

"I'm sorry, Theresa. I'm going to miss dinner this evening, and I don't want you to miss it, too. You can come with me next time, all right?" Gertrude continued to walk down the stairs, hoping Theresa would be accept this.

"Well, at least tell Penny I said hello!" Theresa called after Gertrude.

“I will,” Gertrude promised as she opened the front door to the house.

She was glad that Theresa understood. With so many women living together in the same house, sometimes it was necessary to get away.

Gertrude walked as quickly as she could to the ranch property Penny and her husband, Tom McClain, owned in the next town over. Tom was the seventh son of a seventh son, and he and Penny already had three sons of their own. They’d also taken in orphan boys and let them live in cabins on their sprawling property. Penny, Tom, and their boys lived in a huge, beautiful house on the property.

When Gertrude arrived at the McClain ranch, several of the orphaned boys were outside working. Some rode horses, others cleaned the stables, and others tended to the crops and cattle. She walked straight up to the main house and knocked sharply on the door.

Penny answered, a smile growing on her face as she saw who it was at the door. “Gertie! What a surprise! Come in.”

Gertrude was nervous. What had she been thinking, coming all this way to bare her soul to her sister? She walked inside hesitantly. Penny was holding her youngest child, Elijah, who seemed to be sleeping. She led Gertrude into the formal parlor. Penny and Tom had a beautiful house, but they lived simply. Most of the furnishings had been passed down from Tom’s family members, and Penny liked that each of their belongings had meaning.

“What brings you here at this time of night? Will you stay for dinner?” Penny asked. Gertrude didn’t know how Penny managed it all. She had three boys under the age of three and more orphaned boys that lived in the cabins on the property than Gertrude could keep track of. Yet somehow, she managed to keep her home looking beautiful and her stable of children healthy and happy, as well as her husband.

Tom came in and gave Gertrude a kiss on the cheek. “Great to see you, Gertie!”

“Hi there, Tom!” Gertrude relaxed a bit. Tom and Penny were two of her favorite people. “This will be a quick visit.”

Tom seemed to sense that Gertrude needed to speak to Penny alone. “I’ll wash up for dinner.”

Once he had left the room, Penny shifted the sleeping baby to her other shoulder. “Okay, Gertie, now I’m curious! What’s going on?”

Gertrude didn’t know where to start. “There’s this man—this impossible, frustrating man—who’s set up a book wagon outside the library!”

“Yes, I’ve heard about him. A few of the boys mentioned that they saw his cart when they went into town. It sounds like he lives in it?”

Penny shook her head at the notion.

"Yes! The man is mad, I'm telling you."

"Does he come into the library and disturb your books? What's making you so upset?" Penny's voice was full of concern.

"He plays music all day long, and he's got all the children in town chasing after him for hours on end. It's very disruptive, especially because you know how hard I've worked to keep everyone in order."

Penny nodded sympathetically. "I can only imagine how difficult that must be. Have you tried talking to him?"

"I *have* tried, but it didn't make a bit of difference." Gertrude wanted to tell Penny about the other subject on her mind, but she didn't know the right way to bring it up.

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?" Penny knew that Gertrude thrived on rules and organizations. The new man in town had to be driving her sister wild.

"I don't think so." Gertrude felt silly for coming all this way and bothering Penny with her troubles. Penny had her hands full, and she had mouths to feed. "I should be going so you can get back to preparing dinner."

"It's no trouble at all, Gertie. You know that. Are you sure there's nothing else on your mind?" Penny sensed that there was something Gertrude wasn't telling her.

Gertrude sighed. "It's nothing. I don't want to burden you with it."

Penny smiled. "Gertrude, I promise you that you are not burdening me. Come on. You can tell me anything."

Gertrude considered it. She and Penny had always been very close to one another, and they were used to sharing everything. She knew Penny wouldn't judge her for the feelings she was experiencing. "Well, Jed Thorn said that he intends to marry me. And he walked me home. And he kissed me. Right on the cheek!"

Penny's jaw dropped. She lowered the baby and began rocking him side to side as he stirred. "Oh my goodness! And how did you feel about it?"

"Penny, I just don't know!" Gertrude exclaimed. "How did you know that Tom was the one for you?"

Penny chuckled. "Well, that's a difficult question. The answer might take longer than you or I have to talk tonight. But I'll tell you this—I wasn't sure right away. I had my doubts, but Tom seemed sure we were meant to be."

"Yes, Jed seems certain that I'm the woman for him." Gertrude stared at her hands. She felt helpless.

"What do Edna Petunia and Cletus have to say?" Penny wondered.

"I'm not sure. I know they went to visit him the other day, but all they said was that he seemed like a fine young man." Gertrude shook

her head. Her adoptive parents could be so unpredictable.

"It's not like Edna Petunia to keep her opinion to herself." Penny's brow furrowed. "I wonder what they talked about."

"I don't know. Penny, what should I do?" Gertrude felt like she was on the verge of tears. She rarely cried, and never in the company of another person. Jedediah Thorn was making her miserable.

Penny clucked soothingly. "There, there, Gertie. It'll all turn out okay in the end, I'm sure of it. I can't tell you what to do. You have to make the decision that's right for you. But if I were you, I'd think long and hard about this man and if he's the kind of person you can truly envision building a life with."

Gertrude nodded slowly. "Thank you, Penny. I appreciate your advice."

"Of course. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got dinner to finish getting ready." Penny stood up and carried the baby into the entryway. Gertrude followed her.

"I'll see you in church on Sunday. Thanks again, Penny. Tell Tom I said goodbye." Gertrude let herself out and closed the door behind her. She waved to the boys working outside as she set off for the long walk back to the Sanders' house. She felt better after talking to Penny, but she still had no idea what she was going to do about Jedediah Thorn.

* * *

THE WEEKEND PASSED QUICKLY for Gertrude, full of family activities, church services, and playing with her nieces and nephews. She was glad to have a short break from all the troubles at the library.

Gertrude found herself complaining about Jed Thorn more than once to her family, but Edna Petunia and Cletus were both acting mysterious.

"Time will tell, Gertie. Only time will tell," Edna Petunia kept repeating.

All Cletus did was shake his head and chuckle. Gertrude had no idea what type of conversation they'd had, but she didn't like the way they were acting. It was as if they were all in on a secret that no one had bothered to tell her.

On Monday morning, Gertrude rose with the sun and prepared for work. She arrived at the library two hours before opening and spent the extra time scrubbing and dusting every inch of the place. She loved the way everything looked when it was really clean, before the children with sticky hands got their fingerprints all over the place.

Just before eight, she opened the front door as usual, and saw Jed's

wagon parked in its usual spot. He was leaning against it, admiring the morning sky.

“Good morning, Gertrude! You look beautiful!” Jed tipped his hat and combed a hand through his hair.

Gertrude blushed and slammed the door shut. She hadn’t decided what to do about Jed’s advances, and she certainly wasn’t ready to face him so early on a Monday morning. Plus, it was the first day of her new rule about the book wagon. She had to focus.

The first patron of the library that morning was Mrs. Thomas, a widowed woman who cared for her ailing mother. Mrs. Thomas and her mother lived with her sister, and Mrs. Thomas often borrowed books for her sister’s children as well as her mother. Gertrude loved picking out the latest books she thought Mrs. Thomas’s mother would enjoy.

Mrs. Thomas took three books out of her satchel and gave them to Gertrude.

Gertrude accepted them and made a note in her ledger. “How did your mother like the one about the ship?”

Mrs. Thomas grinned. “She absolutely loved it. She told me to pass along her thanks to you for helping to select it.”

“That’s wonderful to hear. I’m glad.” Gertrude loved when she was able to help the members of the community.

“What’s that, dear?” Mrs. Thomas was staring at Gertrude’s new sign about the book wagon.

Gertrude took a deep breath. “As you may know, a Mr. Jedediah Thorn has come to town and parked his book wagon outside the library. This is quite disruptive to the work we do here, and he needs to leave. Until then, I can’t loan books to people who will visit the book wagon.”

Mrs. Thomas wore a concerned look on her face. “But Mr. Thorn has been so wonderful. Just last week, I got a book for my mother that she’d once read as a child! I actually was planning to buy another book from him today after I found another book for my nephews to borrow from the library.”

Gertrude frowned. Mrs. Thomas was one of her most loyal patrons. “If you are going to buy books from Mr. Thorn, I can’t allow you to borrow anything else from the library. I’m sorry, Mrs. Thomas, but it’s our policy now.” Gertrude had no problem enforcing rules. Sometimes her sisters complained about it, but she simply had a firm grasp on her moral compass and wasn’t afraid to use it.

Mrs. Thomas looked torn. She glanced out the window at Jed, then back toward Gertrude. “Isn’t there any way the two of you can resolve your conflict?”

Gertrude nearly snorted. “Mr. Thorn is impossible to reason with.

Trust me, I've tried. Let me help you find a book for your nephews."

"Thank you, Gertrude. I think I'll just be on my way today." Mrs. Thomas walked toward the door, turning back to Gertrude guiltily before she slipped out the door.

Gertrude hurried to the window and watched as Mrs. Thomas approached the book wagon. Jed greeted her with a friendly smile, and they began chatting. Gertrude could see Jed making big gestures with his hands, and Mrs. Thomas laughing. She shook her head. If Mrs. Thomas could abandon the library, would everyone else do the same?

Gertrude didn't have to wait long to find the answer. The morning had been one of the slowest on record, and the afternoon was even worse. As soon as the schoolchildren saw the sign, they'd run out of the library squealing and gone straight to the book wagon. Gertrude could hear them singing along with Jed's banjo. She ate lunch in the closet again to escape the sound.

At the end of the day, Gertrude marched in a straight line toward the Sanders' house, but Jed chased after her.

"Gertie—wait up! Please!" Jed called as he ran toward her.

Gertrude didn't stop walking, but Jed began walking by her side.

"Please, give me a chance. What can I do?" Jed's arm was so close to Gertrude's that she could feel a tingling sensation where they were practically touching. She longed to feel his hands on her body again, but she knew she needed to focus.

"I told you what you could do. You can leave Nowhere and the library alone." Gertrude spoke firmly. She did not want Jed to think there was any room for negotiation, because there wasn't.

"It's the best place in town for my wagon, though. If I didn't set up here, I'd have to go to the outskirts of town, and then no one would visit," Jed tried to explain.

"And if that happened, would you leave me alone?" Gertrude asked, sounding harsher than she had intended.

Jed stopped walking. "I didn't know you felt that way, ma'am." His tone became more formal. "Have a good night, now."

Gertrude paused and watched Jed walk back to his book wagon. He climbed into his wagon and drew the doors shut. Gertrude fought the impulse to go after him. It wasn't appropriate. She turned around and set off again on her walk home.

As she wound through the streets of Nowhere, she worried about the low attendance at the library that day. She hoped it was not a trend that would continue. She didn't understand how Mr. Thorn was already so popular among the town's library patrons. It was really infuriating when she thought about it. Gertrude had been running the library for years with little acknowledgment or thanks. She didn't

need praise or accolades, but a little appreciation wouldn't hurt. Jed had breezed into town on a wagon playing a banjo, and he was suddenly the most popular man in town? Gertrude wasn't sure what she was going to do, but she had to do something. She was pretty sure the town wasn't big enough for the both of them.

Chapter 5

For the rest of the week, Gertrude watched Jed and dozens of

Nowhere residents play instruments, sing songs, and dance around the book wagon while the library sat mostly empty. Gertrude scrubbed the entire building several times over, but it was no use. No one wanted to come to the library anymore.

On Wednesday, it was Gertrude's turn to help with the dishes. As Minnie washed the plates and cutlery, Gertrude dried them off with an old rag and complained about Jed Thorn.

"Everything about him drives me mad. He's so...so...so carefree. That's it. He acts like he hasn't a care in the world. His head seems to be in the clouds. No wonder he lives in a wagon as a grown man!" Gertrude fumed as she vigorously dried a saucer.

"Easy there." Minnie thought Gertrude was pressing so hard she might break some of the dishes.

"Even his hair, and the way he dresses! It's all awful." Gertrude couldn't stop. "Not to mention no one knows where he even gets those books? The Postal Service surely wouldn't deliver to a traveling wagon!"

Minnie was at a loss for words. She wanted to help her sister, but she truly didn't know what to say that would comfort Gertrude. "I'm sorry you're going through this, Gertie."

Gertrude was barely paying attention to Minnie. "Oh, and the songs he sings? How can one person sing so much? I think he must sing almost all day, from the early morning into the evening. And that banjo of his..."

Just then, Edna Petunia wandered into the kitchen, sipping from her hip flask. She swore it was only cough syrup, but Gertrude and her sisters suspected it was a different liquid. "What's all this nonsense about singing? That banjo man still giving you trouble, Gert?"

"He's still there." Gertrude set the drying towel aside for a moment. "I don't know how to make him leave."

Edna Petunia scratched her chin thoughtfully. "You can't make someone do anything they don't want to do." She took another sip from the flask. "But just remember, don't get your oxen in a ditch if

you can help it.”

Gertrude tried not to roll her eyes. She never knew exactly what was going to come out of Edna Petunia’s mouth. She didn’t see how it was pertinent to her situation, but she appreciated that the old woman tried hard to keep all of her daughters happy.

“What does that mean?” Minnie wondered out loud, but Edna Petunia had already left the kitchen and gone off to find Cletus.

Gertrude finished drying the last dish. “I’m really not sure about that.”

* * *

ON THURSDAY, the music from the book wagon was louder than ever. In addition to Jed’s banjo, one boy beat against a drum, and a little girl was blowing into a horn. A dozen or so others were singing, laughing, and dancing around the wagon.

Gertrude’s sole patron, a man named Harris Clark, had put his hands over his ears as he tried to read his legal texts. Like Cletus had done a few years back, he was studying for his law degree.

Gertrude was angry that Harris’s studying was being disrupted, but she was privately glad to have another person who agreed that the book wagon was not a positive presence outside the Nowhere library. It was nice to have someone who saw eye-to-eye with her on that. She felt like the rest of the town had gone crazy. Everyone was taken with Jed and the traveling book wagon. No one cared about rules and responsibilities anymore.

It still made Gertrude angry to think about it too much, so she focused on checking to make sure all the books were in their assigned places. Since it had been a slow week, she didn’t have nearly as much work to do as she normally did. She had already dusted and polished the library from top to bottom five times over, reviewed the entire card catalog, and read four books since Monday. She was running out of ideas.

When Jed and his band grew even louder late in the afternoon, Gertrude had had enough. She’d tried to co-exist in peace with Jed, but he’d finally gone too far.

She strode outside and the music stopped playing abruptly.

Jed tipped his hat. “Good afternoon, Gertrude. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

Gertrude simmered with anger. “You’re being very, very loud. You’re disturbing the people in the library. People who are trying to study!”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize anyone was in the library.” Jed spoke

with a bright, cheerful expression on his face.

Some of the children laughed, and Gertrude felt her face grow red. "Yes, we have people in the library studying for their law exam. Not that I'd expect you to understand anything about responsibilities and duties. You seem to do whatever you want, whenever you want."

Jed looked taken aback, and Gertrude wondered if she'd gone too far. "We'll quiet down, Miss Sanders." Jed spoke softly, and a low murmur ran through the crowd.

Gertrude smiled, unsure what to do next. She looked around and gave a stern glance at all the children who used to visit her in the library. Then she walked back into the library and leaned against the wall to catch her breath. She was shaking. She knew she should be happy—she'd won, Jed was going to quiet down. But she felt miserable.

Gertrude locked up and left the library earlier than usual that day. She had only closed early twice before...once when she'd been ill, and once when Penny was in labor and she'd needed to help out at the McClain ranch. But Harris had left, and she couldn't stand to listen to Jed's banjo any longer. He had quieted down since their talk, but it was still distracting and upsetting.

Some of the children were still playing on and around the book wagon as Gertrude set off for her home. Jed waved goodbye to her, but she didn't wave back. She felt a mix of emotions toward him; anger and frustration, of course, but also a little sadness...and something else, too. Her heart beat a little faster as she remembered his lips pressing against her skin. She found her mind racing to a place she didn't feel comfortable with, thinking thoughts that were definitely not ladylike. Gertrude quickened her pace and tried to think about something else. Anything else.

When she arrived home, Theresa opened the door and told Gertrude that Cletus wanted to see her in the formal parlor. Gertrude went into the parlor right away.

Cletus was reading a thick book, and he set it down on the desk when she came in. "Have a seat, Gertrude."

Gertrude sat down. She was worried that Cletus was going to give her bad news. What if Edna Petunia was sick, or one of her sisters? Gertrude felt a pit of nerves start to grow in her stomach.

"I was at town hall today on official business." Cletus was the town judge, and he worked closely with the other elected officials of Nowhere. "The mayor talked a lot about the town finances today. Accounts and invoices and the like. Do you understand?"

Gertrude nodded. She didn't understand where he was going with their discussion.

"It seems that the mayor's wife let him know about the book

wagon. He was very intrigued, and he also learned that the library's attendance has been lower since the book wagon has been around. Is that all true?"

"Well, yes...but it's not fair!" Gertrude blurted out.

Cletus held up a hand. "Fair's not relevant here. The mayor's putting it up to a vote next week. They'll close the library if there's not enough interest."

Gertrude felt a lump well in her throat. "What? That can't be."

Cletus nodded slowly. He felt for the girl. She was an odd bird, but she loved that library and cared for it as her sisters cared for their children. Sure, she may have gotten caught up in rules and procedures more than the average person, but she had a good and pure heart. It didn't seem right that the thing she loved the most might be taken away from her. "I'll vote to keep the library, of course. A town can never have too many books, in my opinion. But I'm just one vote out of ten. And..."

"And what?" Gertrude couldn't believe what was happening. Everything she'd worked so hard to build was falling apart.

"I don't think the others will vote to keep the library. The town is tightening our purse strings. It will help us reduce our costs." Cletus' face was pained as he explained this to Gertrude. As a father, he hated to cause pain to any of his daughters.

Gertrude tried to remain calm. "Thank you for telling me. I think I'm going to go up to my room and read for a bit."

"I understand. Sweetheart, let me know if you need anything, even just to talk. You know Edna Petunia and I are here for you, don't you?" Cletus asked.

Gertrude nodded. "Yes, I do. And I appreciate it. Thank you, Cletus. Please excuse me." Gertrude left the parlor and went upstairs into her bedroom. She selected a book from the shelf and sat down on the bed to begin reading.

When it was time for dinner, Gertrude didn't feel ready to face her sisters or parents. She stayed in her room even as she heard everyone go to the kitchen. Katie ran upstairs and knocked on the door.

"I'm not feeling well!" Gertrude called through the door. "I'm not going to eat tonight."

"Are you sure? I can bring you a plate," Katie responded, concerned. It was unusual for any of the girls to miss dinner, but especially Gertrude. She was always diligent about sticking to plans and routines.

"No, thank you," Gertrude replied softly. She heard Katie's footsteps on the stairs as her sister went back into the kitchen with the rest of the family. Gertrude wasn't hungry.

The next day, Gertrude didn't want to get out of bed. She was

normally an early riser and excited to start her daily routines, but she found herself wishing she didn't have to go to the library. Since Nowhere was such a small town, however, there were no other librarians. Gertrude was the only staff member.

She considered sending word that she was ill and that the library would be closed for the day. If she did that, though, the mayor might take it as a sign that the library really should be closed for good. And she would have felt terrible, knowing she wasn't really sick. Still, the thought of going to the library and having to see and hear Jedediah Thorn all day made her feel like crying.

Gertrude washed her face and brushed her teeth and tried to prepare for the day ahead of her. She walked to the library, desperately thinking about ways she could save the library. If only there was a way to convince the mayor that the library's presence in the town was vital. Then he wouldn't vote to close it. And if she had the mayor's support in addition to Cletus's support, the rest of the elected officials were sure to follow.

But how would she explain it to the mayor?

The day passed quickly. Gertrude had only one patron, Harris, who came in the morning to study, went back to his house for lunch, and returned in the afternoon to read more texts. If the attendance continued this way, no wonder the mayor was considering closing the library.

Gertrude watched through the window as she saw Jed speaking animatedly to many of her former library patrons. They were admiring his selection of books. That made Gertrude pause. How did Jed get all of his books? It was rather odd how he managed to have such a broad selection that fit inside a wagon.

Gertrude shook her head. She needed to focus on the library, not Jed Thorn. But naturally, she couldn't help but stare at his broad shoulders, dark hair, and strong chin and imagine what it would feel like to be held and kissed by him.

By the late afternoon, Gertrude was no closer to saving the library. She walked toward the Sanders home dejectedly. She saw Jed grooming one of his horses. She didn't know why, but she walked over to him.

Jed's face was surprised, but he smiled as Gertrude approached. "Hello, Miss Sanders."

"Hello, Mr. Thorn." Gertrude felt suddenly shy.

"Shaping up to be a beautiful night, isn't it?" Jed asked. Though the temperatures were cool that time of year, there was a gentle breeze and plenty of light.

Gertrude wasn't sure what to say. "The town may close the library."

“What?” Jed’s eyes were full of concern. He took a step closer to Gertrude. “Why is that?”

Gertrude lowered her gaze. “Because no one is coming to the library anymore. They’re coming here instead.”

Jed’s expression was a guilty one as he considered the information. “I’m so sorry, Gertrude. Please believe me when I tell you that was never my intention. I am so upset to learn that I may be responsible for causing you harm.”

“That’s not really what’s important here, is it?” Gertrude snapped.

Jed swallowed hard. He knew Gertrude would be a challenge. He liked her saucy nature, but sometimes her harsh words cut deep. “I’m very sorry. What can I do?”

“You’ve done enough.” Gertrude tried to soften her tone. She knew the conversation wasn’t going well, but she didn’t know what else to do.

“There must be something. Gertrude. I’ll do anything.” Jed’s earnest expression made Gertrude’s heart melt a little.

Gertrude thought about this for a while. “Well, I know that I’m tired of arguing with you. Can we find some agreement so we don’t fight all the time?”

Jed nodded eagerly. “Absolutely. I’ve been feeling the same way. You’re the only person in Nowhere who I care about impressing, Gertie.”

“Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves. It’s either Gertrude or Miss Sanders.” Gertrude raised an eyebrow.

Jed flushed red. “Yes, you’re absolutely right, Miss Sanders. Won’t happen again.”

Gertrude turned slightly so he wouldn’t see that her face was red, too. “I think if you went to the mayor and explained why Nowhere needs both a library and a book wagon, that could save the library. But I don’t know. It still might not work.”

“Whatever it takes, Miss Sanders. I’ll do it.” Jed’s voice was resolute, and Gertrude believed him.

“Okay, then. Thank you.” She felt strange speaking to him so formally.

“You’re welcome. Please, let me walk you home.” Jed finished polishing his horse’s saddle and set down the tools he was using.

Gertrude was torn. On one hand, she wanted Jed to walk her home, talk about marriage, and kiss her again. On the other, he was the same Jed that made her furious day in and day out, the man who was interfering with all of her work. After thinking about it for several moments, she told him, “All right, fine.”

Jed walked slowly beside Gertrude for most of the walk home. When they were about halfway there, he pulled her aside.

“My favorite part about Nowhere is seeing the stars.” Jed pointed to the night sky.

Gertrude was confused. “You couldn’t see stars where you came from?”

“I was raised in the city. You don’t see stars as clearly as you can out here. Everything here is a little quieter and friendlier. I’d like to stay here for a long time.” Jed looked deep into Gertrude’s eyes as he spoke.

“But you have a traveling book wagon. What would it be if you didn’t travel to other places all the time?” Gertrude didn’t understand.

“I have a feeling my traveling days are over. I’ve found the woman I’d like to hitch my oxen to.” Jed stepped closer toward Gertrude.

“Oxen? You haven’t been talking to Edna Petunia, have you?” Gertrude tried to make a joke, but Jed didn’t laugh. His face was completely serious.

“Ever since I met you, Gertrude Sanders, I’ve known you were the one for me. Please don’t make me beg you, because I will beg you. I’m not too proud. Marry me, Gertrude. I won’t be happy until you agree.” Jed beamed from ear to ear as he stared at Gertrude.

It took everything Gertrude had not to leap into his arms and agree to his proposal. But her primary obligation was to the library and the people of Nowhere. “I can’t agree to that, Mr. Thorn. Not until I’m confident the library is not going anywhere.”

Jed sighed. “I understand. You’re a good woman, Gertrude Sanders. Sometimes I wish you weren’t quite so principled.”

Gertrude smiled. “What do you mean by that? Hopefully nothing improper?”

“Oh, I’ve had many an improper thought about you, Gertrude.” Jed’s voice alone sent tingles up and down Gertrude’s spine. He slipped his hand into hers, and she felt a jolt through her entire body.

“What are you doing?” Gertrude wanted him to keep holding and touching her, but she also knew it wasn’t appropriate.

“I’m sorry, Gertrude. I know it’s not proper, but from the moment I met you, all I have been able to think about is holding your face in my hands and kissing you.” Jed leaned in closer to Gertrude. She felt her breath catch.

“Is that right?” Gertrude whispered.

Jed lowered his lips toward hers. “Absolutely.” Jed pushed his tongue between Gertrude’s lips, and she let out a small squeal of surprise.

“Shhhh!” Jed warned, his eyes dancing with mischief. “Don’t want to wake up the good citizens of Nowhere, now, do we?”

Jed put his hands around Gertrude’s waist and pressed up against her. It was all happening so fast. Gertrude pushed him back and

stumbled away.

"I'm sorry. I have to leave!" Gertrude cried, out of breath. She began rushing back to the Sanders house.

"What? Please, don't go!" Jed called. He raced after her. "At least let me finish walking you home."

Gertrude held her hands up to him. "No, no, I'm fine. I promise. Please. I'll see you tomorrow."

Jed sadly waved goodbye and walked back in the direction of his wagon.

Gertrude tried to get her heart rate and breath back to normal. She needed time to think. Jed made her body feel things that she'd never felt before. Things that were wrong and inappropriate before marriage. She knew that marriage was an option. Jed had made that clear. But was he a suitable match for her?

Gertrude knew it was a bit snobbish, especially since she had grown up in an orphanage, but she simply couldn't imagine living with Jed in the book wagon. For one thing, it was quite small. It was quite a feat that all of Jed's books and living supplies could fit in the wagon, let alone Gertrude. She wasn't vain and didn't have trunks of clothes and shoes like other young women of her age, but she did have some belongings, and there was no way they'd fit in that wagon.

Then there was the problem of Jed's easy, carefree nature. Gertrude had always thought that if she did marry, it would have to be to someone who was as by-the-book as she was. A good Christian man who gave thanks to God and played by the rules. She realized she didn't even know if Jed attended church. She had never seen him at the local church where Micah presided, but she knew there were a few other churches in nearby towns. She made a note to ask Jed if he was a church-goer.

Finally, there was the library. How could the small town of Nowhere have enough space for both a traditional library and a book wagon? And the music was yet another concern. If Gertrude married Jed, would he play music every day for the rest of their lives?

Of course, there were also positives to consider when thinking about Jed. There were his strong arms and gentle hands, his broad shoulders, and his delicate lips. There was the way he made her feel and the way he made her laugh. There was the way that she felt when she was with him, like they could do anything together.

But, Gertrude reminded herself, that all meant nothing if he couldn't support her. She was attracted to Jed, and there was no denying it...but it seemed impossible that he could support a family on his income from the book wagon. And a man that didn't live in a home had to have a few screws loose. Just look at Cletus!

Gertrude arrived at the Sanders' house before she knew it. She had

been reviewing all of the different aspects of the situation so intently that she'd barely been aware of her surroundings. She was home, but she was more lost than ever.

Chapter 6

“It’s Gertrude. Please let me in!” Gertrude knocked on the doors to Jed’s wagon.

It was before six in the morning, and Gertrude could hear Jed grumbling a bit as he moved around in the small wagon. A few moments later, he opened the door, rubbing his bleary eyes. “Gertrude? Come on in.”

“No, thank you.” Gertrude’s tone was stiff and formal. “I have a few questions for you.”

“All right. Let me pull some clothes on and come outside.”

Gertrude was in shock. She couldn’t believe Jed would acknowledge that he wasn’t wearing any clothes, or that he had invited her into his wagon, knowing that he wasn’t wearing clothes. She was glad that Sarah Jane wasn’t there to see it. She was one of the more judgmental of Gertrude’s sisters, and she didn’t approve of any inappropriate premarital behavior or flirtation. Being in a room with a man without his pants...that would certainly have crossed the line.

After more grumbling, Jed opened the door to the wagon and stepped out. He wore a wrinkled shirt, his usual brown pants, and had put on his hat to block the sun from his face. “Morning, Gertrude!” Jed smiled broadly.

“First question, please tell me more about your faith. You haven’t mentioned it.”

“Well, actually, when I spoke to your parents, I told them how I donate part of my income to my church. It’s about halfway between here and Austin. I know I should really start going to the local church, but that’s the church I was baptized in, so I have kept going back.” Jed’s answer was easy and honest.

Gertrude felt a wave of relief wash over her. She was so grateful that Jed loved and worshipped God like she and her family did. There was absolutely no way she could ever marry a man who didn’t consider church a big part of his life.

“Next question. Do you ever see yourself having children?” Gertrude hoped Jed would answer this question well, too.

“I love children, you know that. I have so much fun with them. I’d

love children of my own one day, but I'd want the space to raise them right. I don't think a book wagon is going to be sufficient for that...or for my future wife, for that matter." Jed's eyes sparkled playfully.

Gertrude realized she'd been holding her breath and exhaled. So far, Jed was passing her test with flying colors.

"Where do all your books come from? And how do they all fit in that little wagon?" Gertrude stared at the wagon curiously. It still mystified her.

Jed chuckled. "My books come from many of the places I've traveled to. As you know, I used to go from town to town. I'd make friends, and occasionally I write to them and they will send me books. They come from shops and libraries and mercantiles. That's how I have such a great variety."

Gertrude frowned as she looked at the wagon. "But the wagon is so small!"

"I can show you if you'd like..." Jed said, standing closer to Gertrude and whispering in her ear. Gertrude shuddered as she felt his breath against her skin.

"Not now. I have work to do." Gertrude tried to speak as neutrally as possible, but she was shaking as she walked toward the library.

Once she was safely inside, she took a few deep breaths, leaning against the front door. Jedediah Thorn had such a strong effect on her. She was worried that if she didn't focus, the library would be doomed.

* * *

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Gertrude's sister Betsy brought her children, Amy, David, Samuel, and Matthew to visit the library. She had adopted them; they were the younger siblings of her husband, Charles, whose parents had died tragically a few years back. Gertrude saw them coming and watched as they approached the building. To her dismay, she watched as they began crowding around Jed's book wagon and exclaiming over the selection.

No one was in the library, so Gertrude came running out to greet them. "Hello, children! Hello, Betsy! Why don't we all come this way..."

"Will you teach me how to play the banjo?" Amy asked Jed. "My mama used to play the piano, but she lives in heaven now so I have a new mama."

Jed bent down on his knee so he could speak to Amy at eye level. "I'm sorry to hear that your mother is in heaven. But I'm glad you have someone who is taking care of you."

"I'm Betsy Brooks. Nice to meet you." Betsy extended a hand, and

Jed shook it.

"Jedediah Thorn. Pleasure's all mine. Are you any relation to Gertrude? It seems every young lady I've met around that age is one of her sisters." Jed looked back and forth between Gertrude and Betsy.

"Yes and no." Betsy laughed. "We are sisters, but we're both adopted. We were both orphans in New York."

"I see. That explains why you don't look very much alike." Jed turned his attention to Amy. "Now, let's see how you like to play the banjo!" He held the instrument in front of her and allowed her to pluck some of the strings.

"This is fun!" Amy declared. "Do you think they have banjos in heaven? I think my mama would have liked this very much."

Jed stared at the sweet little girl in amazement. "I think they do have banjos in heaven, Amy. I think they do."

"Well, we should go inside the library now. Betsy and the children came to visit me." Gertrude gestured toward the library, but David and Samuel were examining a thick book together.

"It's a big book of plants, with all their names and pictures!" Samuel cried.

"Can we get it?" David asked Betsy.

"That depends. Mr. Thorn, how much is this book?" Betsy picked it up and ran her finger across the book's hardcover.

"Five cents, ma'am," Jed said, winking at David and Samuel.

"Thank you. We'll take it."

"Really, we should be getting into the library." Gertrude felt annoyed. Not only were Betsy and the children spending time with Jed and the book wagon, but they were supporting his business!

"Mama, can I stay here while you visit Auntie Gertrude in the library?" Amy asked. Gertrude had to admit, she was absolutely adorable. It would be difficult to say no to her little face.

But she had to. "No, Amy, we're all going into the library." Gertrude took Amy's hand and David's hand and began walking. Samuel, Matthew, and Betsy followed close behind.

When they got into the library, Gertrude showed Amy to a small corner of the library where there was a chalkboard for practicing school lessons and some books for children her age. Matthew began looking through the stacks for a book he needed for school, and David and Samuel found some pens and pencils and began drawing at one of the tables.

Once the children were focused on their own activities, Betsy grabbed Gertrude's arm. "You didn't tell me about the handsome book wagon man!"

Gertrude blushed. "There's nothing to tell."

Betsy stared at Gertrude. "I think there is. I saw the way he was

looking at you! That wasn't nothing."

Gertrude rolled her eyes. "Well, maybe there is a little attraction. But I don't see how anything good can come from it. No one comes to the library any more because of the book wagon."

Betsy pointed to the sign that said patrons couldn't borrow books if they also went to the book wagon. "With all due respect, isn't that sign the reason no one is coming in here?"

Gertrude had to admit that her sister had a point. "I suppose...but I can't keep running this place with that loud commotion out there all the time. It's too noisy and disruptive!"

"Hmmm." Betsy thought for a moment. "What if there was a way to make the book wagon less distracting? Would that work?"

"Well, maybe. But how would you do that? They're out there every day, the entire time we are open, singing and playing music and being loud." The words came tumbling out. Gertrude could barely stop herself.

Betsy looked out the window for a few moments, then looked inside the library. "I have an idea..." She disappeared for a few moments into the closet and came out holding a small patch of carpet.

"I've seen this once in a school house. What if you set up this corner of the library to be the 'Book Wagon' corner? And at certain times of the day, they can be loud and play music. But the rest of the time they need to be quiet, just like everyone else. That way, the Book Wagon is inside the library, not outside, distracting people." Betsy stopped, flushed with excitement at her idea.

Gertrude nodded, considering all the possibilities. "That's not a bad idea. Though I don't love the idea of singing in a library."

"But if it's between not having the library at all, or having a library with singing, which would you prefer?" Betsy pointed out.

"That's true. Hmm. I'll think about it," Gertrude promised her sister. Betsy only smiled.

"Well, children, we should probably go home now to start to prepare dinner. Find the books that you'd like to check out."

David pointed at the sign about the book wagon. "Mama, I don't want to check out a book, because then we can't go to the book wagon anymore!"

Gertrude sighed. Even the youngest children didn't want to use the Nowhere library anymore. She had a lot of work to do before the mayor held the vote on whether or not the library should remain open.

"All right. Thank your Aunt Gertrude for letting us visit her at work," Betsy said.

"Thank you, Aunt Gertie!" A chorus of voices rang out. Gertrude smiled. She walked the group to the door and waved goodbye. Betsy

was the last to slip out the door.

“We didn’t get to talk much, but I wanted to tell you that I really liked Jedediah Thorn. I don’t know what’s going on between the two of you, but I think you should try to work it out. You don’t meet men like him every day!”

Gertrude blushed. “I’ll think about it. Now I think you’ve worn out your welcome! Goodbye, children!”

Gertrude spent the rest of the day thinking about Betsy’s suggestion. She knew she had to make a change. Library attendance would continue to decrease if she didn’t change her policy. It seemed like allowing people to use the book wagon would mean more people would use the library again, but it was hard to tell.

She also wasn’t ready to admit to Jedediah Thorn that she was going to start working with him again. He was loud and full of himself and frustrating, and she still didn’t know where they stood. He had made his affection for her clear, and he had also answered all of her questions truthfully and with answers that satisfied her.

Still, she had some nagging doubts in the back of her head. Plus, the upcoming library vote was weighing heavily on her. She decided not to respond to Jed’s invitations or proposal until she knew what would happen with the Nowhere library. It seemed only fair.

She cleaned up the papers and books that Betsy’s children had worked on and swept the floors, feeling helpless. She saw that a few more people had brought their instruments, and were forming a circle around Jed. She watched as he began playing the banjo, and the others followed suit with their own instruments. It was rather impressive, how a group of individuals combined to form a whole group, working together so beautifully.

Still, Gertrude worried, music had no place in a library. There had to be some arrangement that could keep both Gertrude and Jedediah happy, but it couldn’t be at the expense of the Nowhere citizens who relied on the library to quietly read or study. She resolved to keep thinking about it until she had a better idea.

Gertrude watched as another group of people began to dance to the music. What had started as two or three people a few weeks ago had blossomed into dozens and dozens of people, talking to each other, playing music, and dancing. Normally, Gertrude wasn’t a fan of social gatherings. She preferred one-on-one time or being alone...but she had to admit, the gathering looked quite fun.

Gertrude shook her head as she realized what she had been thinking. Jedediah Thorn had clearly gotten under her skin. There was no way the old Gertrude would have even considered going outside to join a music and dancing group. She didn’t like the effect the man was having on her. And yet as she watched the group swaying to the

music, and saw Jed's strong hands strumming each banjo string, she couldn't stop thinking about what those same hands would feel like when they touched her again.

Chapter 7

The following day was clear and bright. Gertrude was pleased to see that the wagon was not in its usual place when she arrived at work. She re-organized the children's section until it was to her liking. She'd always liked to stay busy, and felt that way even more after Cletus and Edna Petunia had adopted her. The Sanders believed in working hard and never being idle. It was why Edna Petunia still found the time to do many tasks around Nowhere in addition to her household responsibilities, and why Cletus served as the town's judge at his age.

As she unlocked the door at opening time, she peeked outside to see if Jedediah was back yet. But the wagon was still gone. Had he given up and moved on to a different town? Gertrude found that she was sad thinking about the possibility of Jed never coming back. She had grown accustomed to seeing his kind eyes and broad shoulders each day. She couldn't get his smile out of her head no matter how hard she tried.

Even though there was no wagon to distract the townspeople, by lunch time, no patrons had passed through the library doors. Gertrude pulled out her fried chicken and baked beans and began to eat her meal slowly and sadly. She'd never realized how much joy it brought her to run a bustling library. Even though she liked to keep peace and quiet in the library, it felt wrong without the small sounds of papers being rustled or chairs being dragged across the floor.

At half past twelve, the door burst open. Gertrude looked up, pleased that someone had finally come to borrow a book. But to her dismay, it was only Edna Petunia—and the woman was a mess. Her hair was disheveled, her blouse had one button undone, and she was panting as if she'd just finished a race.

Gertrude jumped out of her seat and walked over to the older woman. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. For now. We need to have a talk." Edna Petunia's tone was far more serious than Gertrude was used to.

"Of course. Let's sit down." Gertrude pulled out a chair and Edna Petunia flopped down into it, slowly catching her breath. Gertrude

walked around to the other side of the table and took a seat facing her.

"I came over here because I had a dream." Edna Petunia paused dramatically.

"Yes? I don't understand." Gertrude wished Edna Petunia would get to the point.

"You and the man from the book wagon. Married!" Edna Petunia glared accusingly at Gertrude.

"Well, that's ridiculous. I think he's gone off and left town." Gertrude tried to keep her tone steady, but her voice broke a little as she thought about the fact that she might never see Jed or hear his banjo again.

"In my dream, you two had married without my knowledge or permission. How could you *do* that, Gertrude?" Edna Petunia took a peppermint stick out of her cleavage and snapped it into two pieces. She began crunching one piece between her teeth.

Gertrude watched Edna Petunia's face grow red, and she grew upset, too. "You can't think I would go and do something like that! I know how badly you felt when some of the other girls got married without you being able to plan their weddings."

A few years ago, when Penny and Tom had married, Edna Petunia had gone overboard planning an elaborate wedding, with decorations, dresses, and cakes all detailed to perfection. She had driven Penny and Tom, and both of the families, to distraction with her level of effort. The family had hoped she'd gotten it out of her system, but instead, it only made her more upset when the next sister to get married, Dorothy, had been married quickly by Micah. Edna Petunia got furious whenever she heard anyone imply that any of her remaining single daughters might have anything less than a year-long engagement.

Edna Petunia took a deep breath. "I know what I dreamed about and my dreams are never wrong. You're going to marry that man. You need to promise me that you won't do what most of your sisters have done and get married behind my back. Do you hear me?"

"Edna Petunia, you have absolutely nothing to worry about. I'm not interested in Jed Thorn that way. I've decided I'm not the marrying type." Gertrude nodded her head, as if she were trying to convince herself of it, too.

Edna Petunia snorted. "You're far too young to know if you're the marrying type, Gertie. When you're my age, then you can tell me if you don't think marriage is for you."

"How did you know that Cletus was the one for you?" Gertrude decided to try to distract the woman. She knew from prior experience that it sometimes could work. It all depended on what kind of mood

Edna Petunia was in.

Edna Petunia thought for a moment. "Well, he made me feel something I hadn't felt in a long, long time. A part inside of me that I thought was long gone. It was like he woke me up. And I wanted to keep feeling the way he made me feel."

Gertrude thought she understood. "He made you feel alive? I think I know what that feels like."

Edna Petunia pointed a finger at Gertrude. "So you *are* in love with Jed Thorn! You are planning to marry him! I knew it!"

Gertrude stared at Edna Petunia. The old woman had finally lost it. She'd known this day would come. "Please, with all due respect, can you lower your voice?"

"Why? It's not as if anyone is here to hear me!" Edna Petunia pointed out, looking around the empty library.

"You may be right about that, but you're not right about me and Jedediah Thorn. I have no plans to marry the man." Gertrude took Edna Petunia's hand, something she wouldn't normally do but felt she needed to. "Trust me."

Edna Petunia sighed loudly. "I may have had too much cough syrup last night. I suppose that could account for my dream."

"Yes, I'm sure that's all it is. But I do appreciate you coming down here. Would you like to check out a book?" Gertrude hoped that maybe some good could come out of Edna Petunia's visit to the library, after all.

"Gertie, you should know by now that I don't need to read books. My life's much more interesting than any book could ever be!" Edna Petunia scolded. She laughed. Sometimes her bastards could be downright silly.

"Yes, you're right. I should have realized." Gertrude smiled warmly at her adoptive mother. She certainly was a lot to handle, but it was worth it to have someone who loved her and her sisters so completely and fiercely.

"I suppose I should be getting home now. Cletus will be finished with lunch by now...and maybe he and I can go on a walk together." Edna Petunia glanced at the library's clock.

Gertrude fought the urge to cover her ears. She knew exactly what Edna Petunia meant by 'take a walk', and she didn't care to hear anymore. "Yes, well, you should be going, then. I'll walk you out." Gertrude rose out of her chair and walked over to the door, holding it open for Edna Petunia.

Edna Petunia walked out the door and turned around before she left. "You promise, right, Gertie?"

"Promise what?" Gertrude wasn't sure what Edna Petunia wanted from her.

“Promise me you won’t marry that man and run off in his book wagon.” Edna Petunia’s words seemed like a joke, but her voice was deadly serious.

Gertrude stifled a laugh. “I promise, Edna Petunia. You have nothing to worry about.” She closed the door behind the older woman, shaking her head. She went to the back of the library to straighten up some of the shelves. She was running out of tasks to do with so few patrons.

A few minutes later, she heard the door open again.

“Edna Petunia, are you back already?” Gertrude wondered out loud as the door creaked open slowly. Instead of her adoptive mother, a pair of children stood outside. “Come on in, children.”

“We have something for you.” A little girl in pigtails and a blue dress spoke shyly and slowly.

“Abigail, come on in,” Gertrude called. She recognized the children from their visits to the library. Abigail’s brother, Stephen, fidgeted nervously next to her.

“Come out to see it,” Stephen finally said.

“What are you talking about?” Gertrude was baffled. She walked to the front door. Abigail and Stephen stepped to the sides and Gertrude saw about ten other children standing in a row. Each of them held a card in his or her hands. “What on Earth...?”

The children suddenly burst into song.

*“Gertie, Gertie, this is true,
Gertie, Gertie, I love you!
Lovely Gertie, I will be,
The happiest man if you marry me!”*

Gertrude’s jaw dropped. The children parted and she could see the book wagon. Jed came tumbling out of it and presented her with a bundle of wildflowers. One by one, each of the children handed her a paper. As Gertrude unfolded them while balancing her flowers, she saw they were all love notes from Jed.

Gertrude struggled to maintain her composure. “Children, please give us a minute alone.”

The children giggled and scattered, likely going back to the schoolyard, as their day had not yet finished. Gertrude found herself growing angry at Jed. Had he even thought about the fact that the children were supposed to be in school the entire day?

“What do you mean by pulling a stunt like this?” Gertrude demanded.

Jed looked disappointed, but covered it with a big grin. “And here I thought you might actually say ‘yes’ instead of being all sour with me.”

“What do you expect from me? You’re nothing like what I’d expect

a man of your age to be.” Gertrude found it hard not to stare at Jed’s big, brown eyes and handsome face.

“And you wouldn’t want me if I were like those other men,” Jed said softly. He walked closer to Gertrude.

“Well, that’s just nonsense. That’s—” Gertrude stammered.

Jed pressed his lips to Gertrude’s. “Tell me you don’t feel something when I kiss you.”

“I...I...” Gertrude was at a loss for words, which was quite unusual for her.

“I’ll wait a few days for my answer.” Jed flicked his tongue in between Gertrude’s lips one last time, then turned on his heel and walked back toward the wagon. A few minutes later, he pulled away in the wagon. Gertrude thought she heard him let out a delighted cry, but she couldn’t be sure.

After Jed had disappeared into the distance, Gertrude took a few deep breaths, trying to slow the beating of her heart back to a normal rhythm. Now she was really in trouble. When Edna Petunia had confronted her, she hadn’t thought there was a chance she would marry Jed Thorn. But now that he’d asked her twice—and properly this time—she actually found herself considering the prospect.

She set out for the Sanders’ house, walking very slowly as she thought about what it might be like to be Mrs. Jedediah Thorn. It would certainly be much different than her life with Cletus and Edna Petunia. There would be no more house full of sisters, no comfortable, spacious home. She let her mind wander as she thought about how she would do their wash. She supposed she could find a stream in the woods, string a clothesline between two trees, and hang their clothes to dry there. She also imagined living every day with Jed’s smile and merry eyes. It was terrifying, but it was also exciting.

That evening, Gertrude felt like she was a character in one of the books she liked to read. She had a huge secret that no one in the house knew about. She spent dinner daydreaming as well, and she barely even noticed when Cletus asked to speak with her after dinner.

“Gertie! Did you hear me?” Cletus called from the head of the table.

“Are you feeling all right?” Martha asked, putting a hand on her arm.

Gertrude snapped to attention. “What’s that?”

“I’d like to speak with you in the formal parlor after dinner.” Cletus’s voice boomed.

Theresa looked shocked. “Is Gertrude in trouble?”

Gertrude looked guiltily at the younger girl. Did Cletus already know about Jed’s proposal? Was he trying to stop the engagement?

“No, nothing of the sort. I’d just like to have a word,” Cletus said,

throwing his napkin down on the table. Still, Gertrude felt nervous as everyone dug into Edna Petunia's famous chocolate cake. She picked at her dessert anxiously.

"If you're not going to eat that, I will!" Katie volunteered. Gertrude pushed her plate over to her sister, and Katie happily began to eat it.

"Something wrong with you, Gertie?" Edna Petunia called from the other side of the table.

"No, I'm fine," Gertrude said.

"Then why are you turning up your nose at my cake?" Edna Petunia demanded.

Gertrude thought fast. "I'm just full from dinner. The casserole was delicious."

"Darn right it was!" Edna Petunia giggled and took a sip from her "cough medicine". Gertrude looked at Martha and suppressed a grin. Although it was very unlikely that she actually carried it for a cough, their adoptive mother was old enough that no one bothered her about it.

After dinner, Hope began to clean the dishes as the family went off to their evening routines. Gertrude followed Cletus into the parlor, her heart sinking further down with each step.

Cletus settled into his arm chair and stared at Gertrude for a long time before he began to speak. Gertrude felt more and more anxious with each passing moment.

"I try to be as honest as possible with you girls, but this is hard for me, Gertie," Cletus finally said.

"What is it? Please, just tell me," Gertrude said, her face flushing. She started to worry that Cletus was going to ask about her romantic feelings toward Jedediah Thorn. She didn't want to speak to anyone about them, much less her adoptive father!

"It seems..." Cletus began. "Well, it seems that the mayor's already made up his mind about the library. The vote is tomorrow, but I've heard that I'm the only one expected to vote in favor of keeping the library."

Gertrude put a hand to her temple. She had been so distracted by Jed Thorn and his crazy proposals of marriage that she had nearly forgotten about the vote to save the library. She couldn't believe what Cletus was saying.

"How could they? It's a vital town service!" Gertrude cried.

Cletus put up a hand. "I agree, Gertie. I intend to continue to vote for keeping a library. But it seems I'll be outnumbered. Now, I don't want you to get all sad and miserable on me, you hear? This mayor can't possibly be elected to another term, so the next mayor we get, we can get the library back."

Gertrude knew Cletus was trying to cheer her up, but it only made

her feel more miserable. The mayor was at the beginning of a four-year term. Three more years seemed far too long to wait. "The library is what I've poured my heart into practically since I moved to Nowhere. What will I do if it closes?"

Cletus shook his head. "I don't know, sweetheart. I truly don't know."

For the first time since she had come to live with Cletus and Edna Petunia, Gertrude began to sob. She put her head in her hands and wept, and Cletus got up from his chair and patted her back.

"There, there, sweetheart. Don't worry. It will be all right." Cletus tried to reassure her.

Gertrude appreciated that Cletus was trying to comfort her, but she thought he had it all wrong. Everything was getting so complicated. She thought maybe she should just accept Jed's proposal. As a wife, she wouldn't work outside of the home, even if the home was nothing more than a book wagon.

Chapter 8

The meeting at town hall was scheduled for six o'clock in the evening, and the day dragged on. Gertrude had stacked and restacked nearly every shelf in the library. There were still very few visitors coming to the library each day, but she was desperate to do something that could help her cause.

In the afternoon, Gertrude went outside to the cluster of people surrounding the book wagon. A hush settled over the crowd as she walked to the center of the crowd.

Gertrude cleared her throat. "I have an announcement."

Jedediah popped his head out of the carriage. "What's that?"

"From now on, you may use both the library and the book wagon. If you really feel it's necessary."

A few of the children rushed up to Gertrude to hug her. She patted them stiffly on the back. She wasn't a natural with children the way Penny and a few of her other sisters were. Still, she had briefly wondered what type of children she and Jed might have...Gertrude tried to push thoughts of Jed out of her mind. She had to concentrate on saving the library.

Jed clapped his hands. "I'm glad you see that Nowhere's big enough for both a book wagon and a library, Gertrude!"

He walked over closer to Gertrude and lowered his voice. "Have you given any thought to my proposal?"

Gertrude's face flushed as Jed's arm grazed hers. "I have. But I don't have my final decision yet. That will take time."

"I understand. I'll wait for you, Gertrude." Jed nodded.

"Thank you for understanding. This is all new to me," Gertrude confided. She felt like she could tell Jed anything. "I'm actually quite worried about the library. The town mayor is putting it to a vote this evening, and Cletus thinks they'll vote to close it."

"What?" Jed's face was a mixture of shock and anger. "How could they do that?"

"The town financials are in poor shape, from what I've learned." Gertrude looked at her hands. "I don't know that there's much else I can do at this point. Cletus thinks it's already been decided, and

tonight's vote is just a formality."

Jed took Gertrude's hands and looked deeply into her eyes. "Gertrude, I know how important that library is to you. I'm going to do everything I can to keep it open."

Gertrude slipped her hands out of Jed's, glancing around nervously at the children. "Please, not until I've given you my answer. I don't want the children to get improper ideas."

"I'll respect your wishes, Gertrude. Please let me know the minute you decide. I don't want to waste any more time without you."

"Thank you. I appreciate it." Gertrude tried to ignore the temptation to stand on her toes and kiss Jed at that very moment, even in front of the crowd of people and children. "Now, I should be getting back to the library."

A few of the children followed Gertrude back to the library. She allowed them to take the erasers outside and clap them together, which was their favorite job. She helped a few of them find books using the card catalog, then borrow them. Still, her mind was on the meeting that evening. She felt distracted and unable to concentrate.

When it was time to close up, Gertrude closed and locked the library's doors. She set off for town hall, feeling nervous and unsure of what the evening might bring.

When Gertrude arrived at town hall, the ten voting members of the council, including Cletus, were already seated in their chairs at the front of the room. A few others were scattered throughout the space. Cletus waved hello to Gertrude, and she waved back. Gertrude made her way toward a seat in the middle. She wanted to be able to hear the discussion, but didn't want to call unnecessary attention to herself.

The town meeting began with topics regarding overall town financials and a few local disputes. There were wandering cattle, unpaid bank debts, and a missing weather vane. Gertrude was entertained, but she hoped they would finally get to the vote. She waited anxiously for the library vote to be introduced.

Finally, the mayor announced that the next vote would be on the matter of the town library. "All those in favor of closing the Nowhere Public Library, say—"

Gertrude heard a loud *thud* as the door to the room slammed open. "Stop the vote! Stop the vote!"

With his wavy hair and brown eyes, Jedediah Thorn stood with his hands on his hips—her knight in shining armor. Gertrude saw that there was a small crowd behind him. She watched as they walked into the meeting room in a calm, single-file line.

"Excuse me?" The mayor wrinkled his nose. A buzz rippled through the courtroom. "We are about to take a vote on the matter of the Nowhere Library. A building, I might add, that is rarely used by

the Nowhere taxpayers and therefore is a waste of our town's resources."

"I demand you stop the vote and reconsider, sir. The town of Nowhere has a wonderful library, and it would be a big mistake to close it." Jedediah Thorn was, true to his word, fighting to save her library.

"But—I thought—aren't you the young man with the book wagon?" one of the other council members asked.

"Yes, that's me." Jed smiled and looked around the room. Gertrude could see the female members of the crowd warming up to him. "Mr. Mayor, respectfully, I do ask you, what is a town without a library? Yes, my book wagon may be a fun stop for some people in the town, but it's not meant to replace a library. A library can carry far more books than my humble cart can. Furthermore, a library is a quiet place of respite. My book wagon is often loud and unruly. It's no place for someone to study or read."

The mayor seemed unimpressed by Jed's speech, but Gertrude was beaming with gratitude. She couldn't believe that Jed was actually defending the library. And all this time, she had thought that his wagon was in direct competition with the library. Maybe this did mean that he truly loved her as much as he said he did. It wasn't that she didn't believe him, it was just that the idea of love was still a new and foreign concept to her.

"All right. We've heard your speech. Now we'll put it to a vote." The mayor sneered at Jed, and Jed took a seat, winking in Gertrude's direction. Gertrude looked away quickly, her face blazing.

The mayor frowned. A few of the other council members had begun talking to each other, and no one paid attention to the mayor's call for a vote. "Hmph!"

"I, for one, see the benefit in having a book wagon and a library. The book wagon can assist with commerce, and the library can assist with education." Cletus put forth his opinion.

"I like what the young man said. A library is a place of respite." Another council member chimed in.

"I have many fond memories of going to the Nowhere Library as a child." A third spoke up. Gertrude could see the mayor's face starting to turn red.

"Let's vote! All those in favor of closing the library, say 'Aye!'" The mayor cried out. "Aye!" He looked around at his other council members in disbelief. Only one had voted with him. "All those opposed?"

"Nay!" Cletus and the seven remaining council men shouted.

The mayor looked shocked. "The nays have it. The library will remain open."

Gertrude felt a wave of relief wash over her body. She was so happy that the library would remain open. It was a wonderful place with an important role in keeping the townspeople educated and informed. The mayor concluded the meeting, and everyone trickled outside and began to congratulate Jedediah.

Cletus was among the first to shake his hand. "Well done, son. That was an impressive speech you gave."

"Not half as impressive as your daughter, sir." Jed looked at Gertrude, who was standing toward the back of the crowd. "I only hope she'll agree to what I've asked her."

Cletus felt a little panic at Jed's words. "What do you mean by that?"

A woman who had been at the meeting pushed Cletus aside and shook Jed's hand. "Very nice speech, sir. Thank you." Cletus was shoved to the back of the crowd as Gertrude made her way to the front.

Oh well, Cletus thought to himself. *Gertie's not going to do anything crazy. She'll find her way home.* He set off for home, tipping his hat to the group as he removed himself from them.

Gertrude waited until the last of Jed's new admirers had congratulated him and disappeared. Finally, it was only the two of them standing outside the town hall.

"That was some speech. Thank you." Gertrude hoped Jed could see how sincerely she felt. He had done something for her that no one ever had. He had fought for the thing that was most important to her and he had never given up.

"It was the least I could do." Jed took Gertrude's hand, and she didn't shy or pull away. "Tell me, have you given any thought to what I asked you the other day?"

"I have given it a lot of thought," Gertrude admitted. "In fact, I can't stop thinking about it."

"I'll take that as a good sign." Jed flashed Gertrude a grin, but she could tell he was a little nervous. They stood there for a few minutes, just holding hands and staring into each other's eyes.

This is nice, Gertrude thought. *I could get used to this.*

"Would you like to come into my wagon for a little?" Jed asked.

Gertrude shook her head. "That wouldn't be right. I fear if I did that, I'd be tempted to do things that aren't appropriate between an unmarried couple."

"Does that mean we are a couple, then?" Jed bent down and touched his forehead to Gertrude's. A shiver went through her body. She didn't know how to respond.

"I understand that you want to be cautious, Gertrude. I respect that. It demonstrates to me the quality of woman you are." Jed

pressed his lips against Gertrude's quickly. "I have to tell you though, it's driving me crazy that I can't fully express how I feel about you. I will wait until you're ready, however long that takes."

Gertrude tried to steady her breathing. It was hard to stay in control whenever Jed was around. He had a major effect on her. Her heart beat faster, her breathing grew harder, and her body felt as if it were on fire. "I really should get back home. My parents will wonder where I am."

"At least let me give you a ride." Jed offered.

"No, I can walk." Gertrude was worried that the longer she stayed with Jed, the less she would be able to resist temptation.

"Gertrude, I insist." Jed hitched his horses to the wagon and helped Gertrude climb inside. He jumped on after that and they set off for the Sanders' house.

It's only an innocent ride home, Gertrude thought to herself. I can't get in trouble for that.

Chapter 9

Jed was quiet on the ride, so Gertrude tried to make conversation.

"You know, for all the time I've known you, I still haven't found out your favorite type of book." Gertrude stared out at the landscape flying by. She found herself wishing the ride were a little longer.

"Oh, I like almost anything. The more adventurous, the better. Robinson Crusoe is one of my favorites." Jed smiled at her. "What about you?"

"I read almost anything, too. But I have a special place in my heart for books that have a love story in them." Gertrude felt she was being too presumptuous, but she couldn't help it. It was undeniable. She had strong feelings for Jed, and she wasn't sure what to do about them.

"Would you like to go on an adventure, Gertrude?" Jed held the reins for a moment, pausing the wagon mid-journey.

"What do you mean by that?" Gertrude felt nervous.

"What if instead of taking you home tonight, we go out for a ride somewhere? We can go anywhere you want. We could go to Bagley, if you'd like. Heck, we could even go to Austin. We could drive all the way back to New York, if you really wanted!" Jed was on a roll.

Gertrude laughed. "Has anyone ever told you that you're raving mad?"

"Not as much as you may think," Jed replied cheekily.

"We can't go to New York in your book wagon. And I do need to get home. It wouldn't be appropriate for you to keep me out at this late hour," Gertrude reasoned.

"It's so hard to be apart from you. You're the only thing I can think of night and day," Jed confessed.

Gertrude sighed. It sounded like Jed felt the same way she did. "You're all I can think about, too," Gertrude admitted.

Jed turned to Gertrude and gave her a dazzling smile. "That makes me almost the happiest man alive."

"Let me guess. The only thing preventing you from being the happiest man alive is me marrying you. Is that right?" Gertrude asked.

"You've got me. I love how clever and quick your wit is, Gertrude Sanders. I know I've said it before, but I'm fully convinced you're the

one for me.”

Gertrude thought long and hard about what she said next. On one hand was her entire life before this moment—growing up in the orphanage, being adopted by Edna Petunia and Cletus, living with her sisters, running the library, and being the strict, uptight, rule-follower she was. On the other hand, was Jed...mad, curious, adventurous, glorious Jed and his offer of marriage. Her life with Jed would be anything but steady and secure, but she found that the very thought of spending the rest of her life with him was far too exhilarating to pass up.

“Yes,” Gertrude whispered.

Jed threw the reins into the air and leaned over. He gave her a long, searching kiss. “Oh, Gertrude. You’ve truly made me the happiest of all men. I can’t wait until the day I can call you my wife!”

Jed ran his hands along the sides of Gertrude’s body until they came to a rest on her hips. He pressed his lips into hers again and began to explore with his tongue.

Gertrude pushed him back gently. “Jed, remember, we’re not married yet! Oh, no!” Gertrude yelled so suddenly that Jed thought she was ill.

“Are you all right? What’s wrong?” Jed asked, panicked.

“I just realized I promised Edna Petunia that we would be engaged for a year!” Her face grew pale as she considered twelve long months without being able to fully express their love for one another.

“Oh, no.” Jed sighed. “I made the same promise to her! And Cletus!”

“You did?” Gertrude asked, puzzled. “When?”

“The first time I met them. You see, I’ve known from the moment I first laid eyes on you that you were the woman I was meant to be with. It just took you a little while to catch up.” Jed smiled, his eyes dancing with delight.

Gertrude marveled. She couldn’t believe that her parents had known about Jed’s intentions ever since the day they met him and hadn’t said a word to her about it. She also couldn’t believe that Jed had known so early on in their relationship that they were meant to be together.

“What are we going to do? Edna Petunia is going to go crazy planning this wedding, just like she did for Penny and Tom’s,” Gertrude complained. “We are in for an entire year of worrying about church ribbons and candles and top hats and gowns.” Gertrude groaned as she thought about it.

“I’ll admit, no part of that sounds like fun.” Jed flicked the reins again to start moving, but they turned around, moving farther away from the Sanders house.

"Where are you going?" Gertrude asked curiously.

"Just driving around for a little, so we can figure out what we want to do about this long engagement."

"What if...what if we get married in secret, but didn't tell people that we'd done it?" Gertrude thought out loud.

"I don't know about that. If we were secretly married, you'd still have to live with your parents. I wouldn't want my wife sleeping under the roof in another man's house. It wouldn't feel right." Jed felt strongly about the subject.

"That's a good point. Oh, Jed, what are we going to do?" Gertrude thought maybe it was a sign that she and Jed weren't meant to be together after all. Or maybe they simply needed to slow down. Only now that she had found the love of her life, she didn't want to slow down. She wanted to be with him all the time. But she understood that there was a process, and she and Jed would have to go through the process just like everyone else.

"If only..." Gertrude thought out loud.

"If only, what?" Jed asked.

"Well, Edna Petunia is a religious woman. We all are. If we could convince a man of God that we are truly meant to be, then I think she'd be fine with us getting married whenever we want to." Gertrude started to get excited as she thought about the idea.

"Didn't you say one of your sisters is married to a pastor?" Jed remembered.

"Yes, that's right. Sarah Jane is married to Micah Barton." Gertrude felt a plan starting to take shape. "In fact, they don't live too far from here. Maybe...just maybe..."

"What are you saying?" Jed didn't know exactly what was going on, but he was excited. Gertrude was normally such a by-the-book rule follower. He loved it when she thought of adventurous schemes and ideas.

"Why don't we go to Micah's house and ask him to marry us right now?" Gertrude cried. "I don't know if I can wait another moment!"

It was all Jed could do to not stop the wagon then and there and throw his body onto hers. He loved her so fully and completely, and he loved that the insane idea had come not from him, but from her.

When they got to Micah and Sarah Jane's house, Gertrude pounded on the door. Micah came to the door, bleary-eyed, wearing his nightclothes.

"What seems to be the trouble?" Micah asked as he opened the door.

"We're so sorry to bother you," Gertrude began. "Jed and I have something very important to ask you. We really need your help...as a brother-in-law, but most importantly as a man of God." She looked at

Jed for assistance.

"Micah, we haven't met before, but I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance. I'm Jedediah Thorn. I recently proposed to Gertrude, and she agreed to marry me. We're two simple folks who are madly in love with one another, and all we want to do is get married. Can you help us?" Jed gave Micah his most charming grin.

Micah rubbed his eyes. "How do you think I can help you?"

"Marry us. Now." Gertrude took Micah's hand. "We wouldn't ask you if it weren't really important."

Now, Micah's eyes were wide open. "Do you mean you're in trouble?" he questioned, slightly horrified. At this, Sarah Jane scampered into the room.

"Oh, no, Gertie, how could you?" Sarah Jane glared at Gertrude. Of all the orphans, Sarah Jane was most likely to judge others.

Gertrude and Jed both started laughing. "No! It's nothing like *that*. We just love each other and want to get married. You should remember what that felt like."

"That was different. We had Chrissy to think about." Sarah Jane reminded her sister. When Sarah Jane and Micah had married, they had adopted a little girl whom Sarah Jane had worked with. They needed to marry so they could offer Chrissy a stable, loving home.

"Will you please help us?" Jed asked plainly.

Micah seemed more alert now. "I'm terribly sorry. Do you know that Edna Petunia is still furious with me for the last wedding I performed without her express knowledge that the wedding was taking place that day? Do you know what it's like to be on Edna Petunia's bad side?"

Gertrude smiled despite the situation. "I have some idea."

"Well, it was wonderful to meet you, but I think we should leave you alone now. Thank you for your consideration, and we're sorry to disturb you." Jed was unceasingly polite.

Micah looked a bit startled again, but shook Jed's hand and waved goodbye.

When they got back to the wagon, Gertrude scowled. "I can't believe he wouldn't marry us. He's married several of my sisters!"

Jed shrugged. "I can understand where he's coming from."

"And Sarah Jane! The nerve of her, to think that I was..."

"We shouldn't worry about them. We should figure out what we're going to do next," Jed spoke calmly.

"You're right. I know it sounds crazy, but I want to be married to you tonight. Do we have any other options?" Gertrude could barely believe the words that were coming out of her mouth.

Jed had a glint in his eye. "I have an idea."

They drove in silence for a while until they reached Bagley.

"This is where I attend church," Jed told Gertrude as they passed by a modest, freshly-painted building. "And I happen to know where the pastor lives."

They drove up to a small brown house, not too far from the Bagley church. Jed helped Gertrude out of the wagon and held her hand as they walked to the door. He knocked on the door and squeezed Gertrude's hand as they waited.

To Gertrude's surprise, the man who opened the door seemed wide awake, even though it was the middle of the night. He wore glasses and loose, flowing robes.

"Pastor George. Thank you for coming to your door at this early hour. We are only here because it's desperately important. This woman is my fiancée, Gertrude Sanders. We'd like to get married. We're in love and can't wait another minute. Can you help us?" Jed blurted out in the same breath.

Pastor George smiled. "Please, come in."

The house didn't have much room, but it was nicely furnished and tidy. Pastor George offered them tea, and they both accepted.

"Tell me more about 'right now'. Why must you marry now, in the middle of the night?" the minister asked with a kind and sympathetic expression.

"Sir, I never in my life thought I'd get married. I thought I'd be a single woman for all my days. When I met Jed, I knew that I could never go back to my old way of life. And that's how I feel now. I can't keep living apart from him. I need to have him in my life and by my side." Gertrude spoke passionately. "Please, sir."

"Pastor, you've known me for quite some time now. You know that I do have some impulses and tendencies that I like to follow. But this isn't an impulse or a tendency. This is true love. And when you've found that...well, I don't want to waste another minute." Jed held Gertrude's hand in his.

Pastor George nodded. "I certainly understand that you two have a remarkable connection. I'd be happy to help you. Are you sure you don't want to wait for daylight? Or in a few weeks or months so your families can be present?"

Gertrude and Jed looked at each other and laughed. "We're absolutely sure," Gertrude told the pastor, and Jed nodded.

Pastor George gave Gertrude a potted plant to use as a bouquet. She struggled to hold it upright. Gertrude and Jed giggled at each other nervously as the Pastor prepared to recite the ceremony.

A short time later, Pastor George officially pronounced them man and wife. Jed bent Gertrude over and kissed her deeply. A thrill went through Gertrude's entire body. She couldn't believe her luck. She was going to spend the rest of her life with this man.

Chapter 10

After their wedding ceremony, Jed took Gertrude on a drive around Bagley. He showed her where he had grown up and where he had enjoyed playing as a boy. The sun was starting to peek through the darkness.

“I think we should probably get back to my parents’ house. They’ll be worried if I’m not there in the morning,” Gertrude said gently. She didn’t want their amazing evening to end, but she also didn’t want to worry her parents. They had been so good to her, and she was worried that she’d let them down by getting married in secret. Still, she was thrilled to be Mrs. Jed Thorn.

Jed pulled up to the house and hitched the horses to a post. “Should I come in with you?” Jed asked his new wife. He was so proud that Gertrude was now his bride.

“Yes. Let’s both tell them together,” Gertrude said, taking Jed’s hand. They walked up to the house and knocked on the door.

Edna Petunia answered and screamed when she saw Gertrude. “Gertie! You nearly scared me half to death, not coming home last night! Come on in, let’s put some food in you.” She turned and seemed to realize that Jed was there, too. “Mr. Thorn. What are you doing here at this hour?”

“Actually—” Jed began.

“We have an announcement to make at breakfast. Please set a place for Mr. Thorn,” Gertrude said bossily.

“There you are, Gertie! We missed you!” Theresa called out, rushing into the room. She turned to Jed. “Gertie is the bossiest of all of us.” Theresa rushed away.

Gertrude smiled. “I’m not *that* bossy.”

“I enjoy that about you,” Jed whispered into Gertrude’s hair, sending chills down her spine.

“What on earth is going on here?” Edna Petunia demanded, looking at Jed and Gertrude suspiciously.

“Let’s eat breakfast,” Gertrude cried, avoiding the subject. “I’m famished!”

Edna Petunia grudgingly set an extra plate for Jedediah Thorn. She

had a sinking suspicion that she knew what Gertrude's big announcement was, but she desperately hoped she wasn't correct, because that would mean that Gertrude would be leaving the house.

The breakfast table was unusually quiet as everyone wondered what Jed Thorn was doing there. Jed and Gertrude said nothing, though, and everyone ate their meal in peace.

Toward the end of breakfast, as most people had finished their food, Jed took Gertrude's hand.

"I'm sure you're all wondering why I'm here at breakfast at your house. It's because Gertrude and I have a big announcement to make," Jed began.

"We wanted you to be the first to know," Gertrude continued. "Jed proposed to me yesterday and we decided we couldn't wait any longer. Jed's pastor in Bagley married us last night."

The faces around the breakfast table were stunned. Some seemed shocked or disappointed, while others, like Katie and Hattie, were thrilled and jumped up to give their congratulations.

Suddenly, they heard a shriek. Edna Petunia had leapt to her feet, grabbed a frying pan, and taken off running—and she was headed straight for Jed Thorn.

Jed looked at Gertrude, terrified, and stood up. They both began running in the opposite direction of Edna Petunia. "*Augh!!*" Edna Petunia cried as she ran through the house. Jed and Gertrude escaped out the front door and continued running until they thought they were out of reach.

"Where did she go?" Jed asked, looking around nervously.

"I don't know. I'm worried." Gertrude knew that Edna Petunia had a fierce side when it came right down to it, and she did not care to see it in action. "Let's go. We'll give her a few days to cool off."

"That's a good idea. Let's get back to the wagon," Jed said. He hitched the horses back to the wagon and began to help Gertrude in. Just then, they heard a loud shriek and saw Edna Petunia barreling toward them.

"Go, Jed! Hurry!" Gertrude shouted.

"I'm going as fast as I can!" Jed cried.

Finally, the horses took off at a gallop. Soon, Edna Petunia was nothing more than a small silhouette against the plains.

"Well...that didn't go nearly the way I expected it to. But thank you for getting us out of there." Gertrude was happy that she'd at least told her family the truth. It might take them a while to process it, but at least they knew that she was now a married woman.

Gertrude realized that they had been riding for some time, and she wasn't familiar with the surroundings. "Where are we?"

Jed smiled. "I have a surprise for you, my bride."

Gertrude smiled. She normally didn't like surprises, but she had a feeling that with Jed, it was going to be good.

A little while later, Jed and Gertrude pulled up in front of a large, beautiful wood cabin. Gertrude couldn't tell from the outside, but it seemed like it had plenty of room inside.

"What are we doing here? Whose house is this?" Gertrude asked, unsure of what Jed was trying to do.

Jed didn't say a word. He simply tied up the horses and helped Gertrude out of the wagon. He led her to the front door.

"Jed, I don't know if we should be bothering people this early in the morning." Gertrude felt nervous. She didn't want to disturb whoever lived in such a nice home.

To her surprise, Gertrude watched as Jed pulled a key out of his pocket. He inserted the key into the door and it opened. Jed pushed the door open and led Gertrude into the room. "This is our home, Gertrude!"

Gertrude's jaw dropped. "Our what?"

"This is where we'll live. I mean assuming you would prefer this house to the book wagon," Jed teased. He loved watching the expressions on her face as she experienced something new.

"But...but...*how*?" Gertrude felt like she was in shock. All this time, she'd been afraid of living in the book wagon with Jed, and he'd had a gigantic wood cabin?

"I'm sorry if you feel like I deceived you, Gertie. But sometimes people don't really know the real me. When I was living out of the book wagon, I knew for a fact that the people who liked me, including you, liked me for the real me. And there's the simple fact that I just enjoy living on the land. But now that I'm your husband, that's going to change. Because I'd like you to fill this house with our babies." With that, Jed began kissing Gertrude passionately.

"Now that we're married, you won't be working at the library any longer. If you ever miss it, you can use the book wagon. I don't imagine I'll use it much anymore," Jed explained. "Or we could build onto the front of the house and make ourselves a bookstore right out of our home. How would you like that?"

Gertrude couldn't stop laughing.

"What's so funny?" Jed asked, baffled.

"Last night, you went to town hall to argue that I should keep the library, and that Nowhere is big enough for a library and a book wagon. But soon, I won't work at the library, and you won't have the book wagon! It's just...funny!" Gertrude smiled.

"I suppose that *is* funny. Just a little bit," Jed allowed. "Would you like me to show you around?"

"Yes, please!" Gertrude exclaimed. She still couldn't believe her

luck at getting to live in such a beautiful place.

The cabin had several rooms. In addition to a dining room, laundry room, kitchen, formal dining room, and five bedrooms, there was also a large porch overlooking the property.

“I can’t believe I get to live here with you!” Gertrude shouted happily.

“I can’t believe I get to live anywhere with you.” Jed smiled at his new wife. “And for my next plan...convincing you to fill these bedrooms up with children!”

Gertrude laughed. “Hopefully not for quite some time. We only just got married, after all!”

“I’ve always wanted a big family. No time like the present!” Jed teased.

“For now, I’d like to focus on getting adjusted to this beautiful home and living with each other. Then, we can worry about children. How does that sound?” Gertrude suggested.

Jed kissed her in response. “That sounds wonderful. I’m so glad I’m married to you, Gertrude Thorn.”

“I’m so glad I married you, Jedediah Thorn.”

Epilogue

Nine months later, Opal and Ruby helped Gertrude walk up the steps to their church. Gertrude put her hands around her stomach.

"I think the babies will come any day now!" Opal chirped happily.

"I think you're carrying two girls," Ruby guessed.

"And I say it's two boys!" Opal countered. Ruby and Opal were two of the oldest orphans. They were twins and Opal had a set of twins, and Ruby had *two* sets of twins. Now, it seemed that Gertrude was also carrying twins. Jed was getting his wish of a big family to fill his cabin.

When they got inside, they saw Sarah Jane rushing around, getting everything prepared for the annual church picnic. Dorothy and Betsy were helping her, but Sarah Jane was a little finicky about where everything should go.

Ruby and Opal were content to stay back and help Gertrude. They knew as well as anyone that carrying twins was difficult on a woman's body, and they wanted to help their sister.

A few minutes later, Jed came in. He had fed the horses and hitched the wagon to a post. "Thanks for taking care of my wife, ladies."

"Of course, Jed!" Ruby and Opal replied. Jed was already popular with Gertrude's sisters, and with her entire family. Only Edna Petunia still seemed a little harsh with him.

As Ruby saw Edna Petunia heading their way, she placed a protective arm around Gertrude.

"Don't worry. I'm not here to fight," Edna Petunia said, and she pulled out a peppermint stick from her bosom and offered it to Gertrude.

Though Gertrude wasn't hungry—and even if she were, she was not interested in a sweat-drenched peppermint stick—she accepted it. "Thank you."

"I wanted to say I think I've managed to let my anger go about what happened when you got married. You know that I love all my bastards so much. When you do something without my involvement... it makes me sad. That's all," Edna Petunia said.

Gertrude was impressed. She'd never heard the woman be so logical before. "Thank you, Edna Petunia. That means a lot. Especially because pretty soon there'll be more grandbabies for you to help care for."

"Yes! Two new grandbastards! I'm so happy!" Edna Petunia shouted.

"Grandbastards?" Jed asked, frowning.

"Don't worry about it!" Ruby, Opal, and Gertrude all said in unison, then started to laugh. Edna Petunia was Edna Petunia. Some things never changed.

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